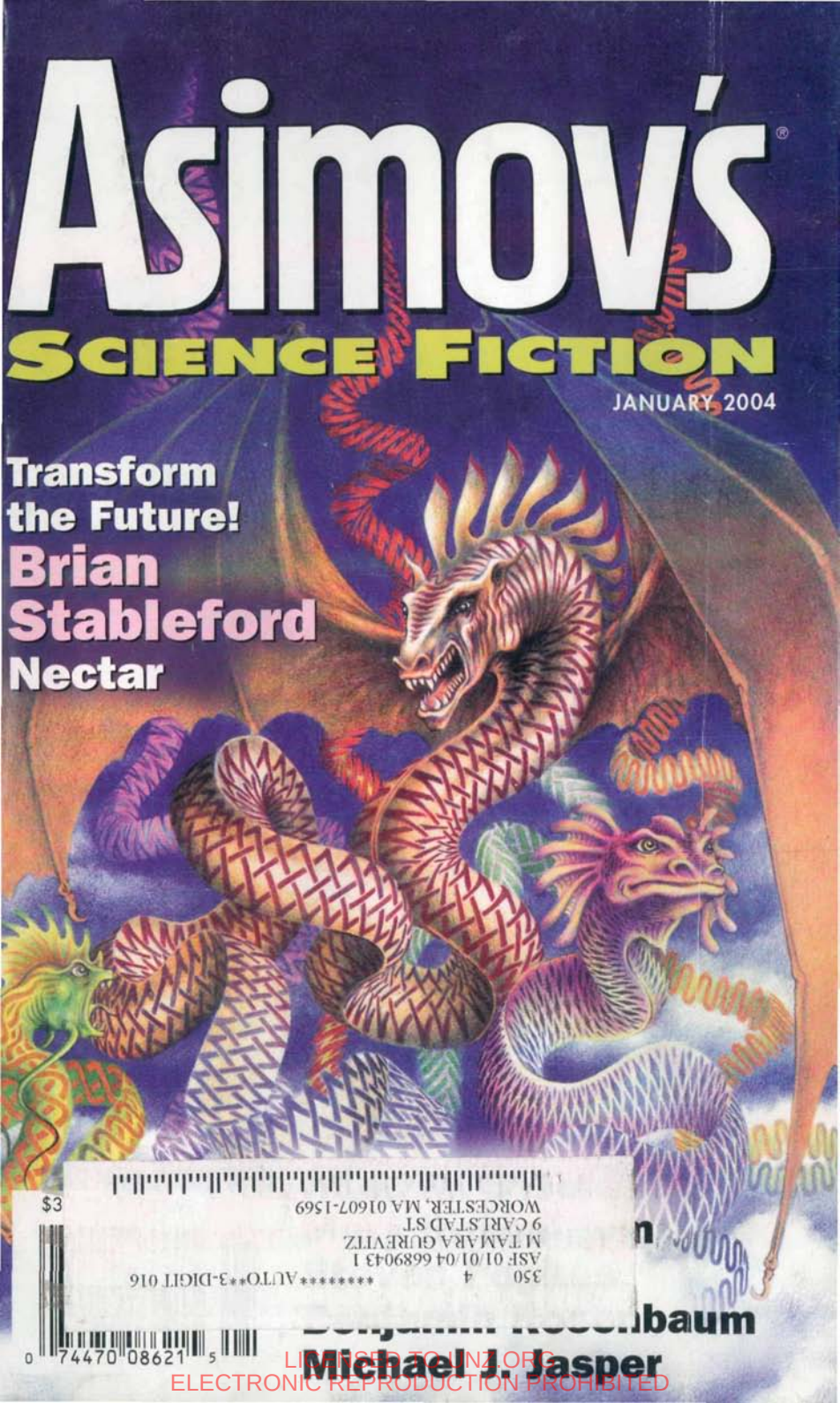

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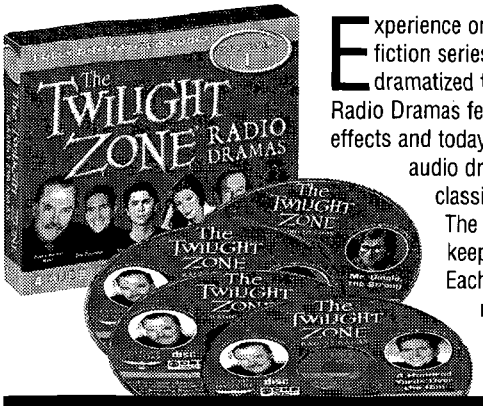

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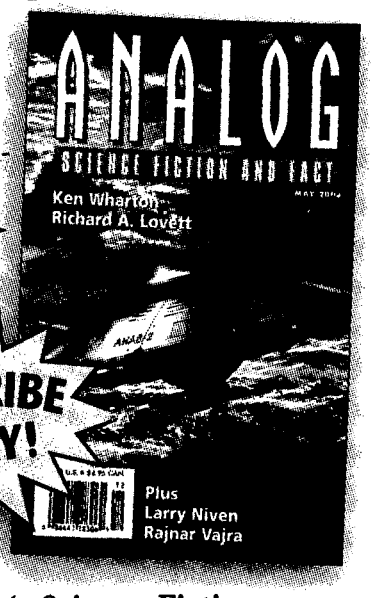

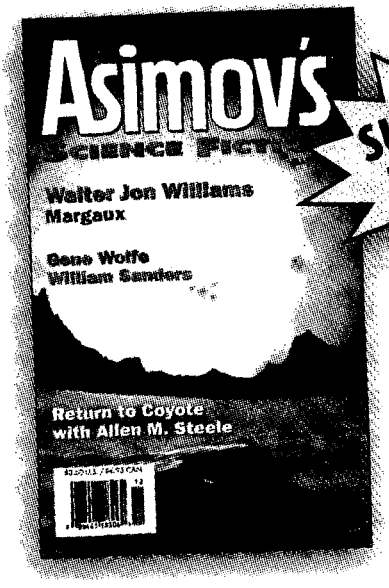

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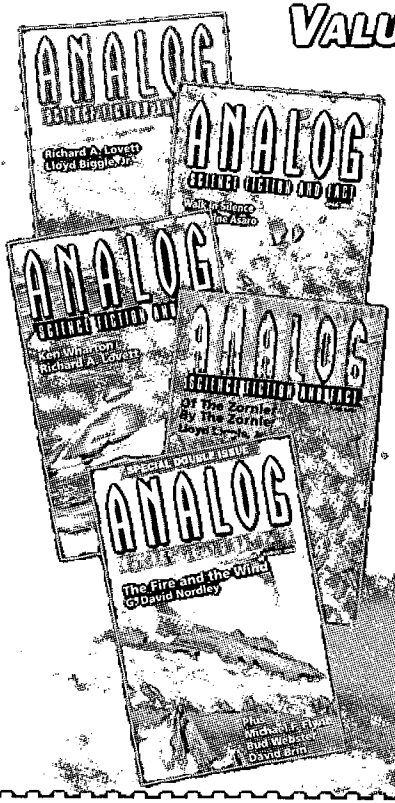

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

NEQUE ILLORUM AD NOS PERVENIRE POTEST

Nullus nostrum ad illos, Guillaume de Conches wrote five centuries ago, *neque illorum ad nos pervenire potest.* He was speaking of the supposed inhabitants of the Antipodes, the lands that lay beyond the fiery sea that was thought to cut Europe off from the as yet unexplored Southern Hemisphere, and what he was saying in that resonant Latin phrase was, "None of us can go to them, and none of them come to us."

But two centuries of bold maritime exploration by Vasco da Gama, Magellan, Francis Drake, and James Cook proved that no equatorial barriers of flame prevent us from reaching the antipodean regions of our planet. I have been there myself more than once, and also have beheld natives of such realms as Brazil, New Zealand, and South Africa moving freely in our own hemisphere.

So far as the inhabitants of other worlds of the universe go, however, the same situation seems to obtain as with the people of the Earth's southern regions in the days of Guillaume de Conches: None of us can go to them, and none of them come to us. And there's also the little question of whether the other worlds of the universe *have* any inhabitants in the first place.

Let us—please—quickly rule out Roswell, New Mexico, and all the rest of the UFO/little-green-men case histories. I'd like very much to believe that the universe is full of intelligent life-forms, and even that they've been paying us surreptitious visits over the last ten or fifteen thousand years, but there's a dire lack of proof that any such visits have ever taken place. (The testimony of your neighbor who was abducted by flying-saucer folk last Christmas doesn't constitute proof, in my book. If Isaac Asimov or Richard Feynman had ever reported being abducted, I might have taken a different stance. But they didn't.)

The best case for the existence of extraterrestrial life is the statistical one, set forth as early as 300 B.C. by Metrodoros the Epicurean: "To consider the Earth the only populated world in infinite space is as absurd as to assert that in an entire field sown with millet only one grain will grow." I find that notion highly plausible, although it does fly in the face of the traditional Christian belief that the creation of life has taken place only once, in the Garden of Eden, on Earth. For some fifteen hundred years it was deemed heretical, and downright dangerous, to disagree with that position. But after Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo proved that the Earth is not in fact the center of the universe but merely one of many worlds, and the Church reluctantly began to accept the notion, serious speculation about the possibility of life on other worlds again became a widespread philosophical pastime.

Galileo didn't like the idea. In his *Third Letter on Sunspots* (1613) he

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denounced as "false and damnable" the thesis that Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, or our own Moon might be inhabited, and claimed he could prove he was right. But Kepler, in a little book called *Somnium* (published posthumously in 1634), suggested that the Moon might be inhabited. Bernard de Fontenelle's amusing *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (1686) offered imaginative descriptions of the beings that might be found on our neighboring planets. ("The people of Mercury are so full of fire that they are absolutely mad; I fancy they have no memory at all . . . and what they do is by sudden starts, and perfectly haphazard. . . . As for Saturn, it is so cold that a Saturnian brought to Earth would perish from the heat, even at the North Pole.")

We know today that life of any sort beyond the level of one-celled organisms is unlikely to the point of impossibility elsewhere in our solar system. Water in liquid form is essential to life as we understand it: Mercury and Venus are too hot for water to remain liquid, Jupiter and the other outer plants too cold, and Mars, though it has a feasible temperature range, seems waterless, or nearly so. But that still leaves the rest of the universe, which brings us back to the irrefutable statement of Metrodoros the Epicurean. The universe is infinite. Our galaxy alone contains some one hundred billion stars; and our galaxy is but one out of many millions of star-clusters, each with its own billions of suns. That an infinite universe would contain only *one* inhabited world is a very hard proposition to defend except by recourse to religious dogma.

Frank Drake of Project Ozma, a pioneering attempt to use radio telescopes to pick up signals from extraterrestrial civilizations, calculated around 1960 that there could be ten thousand advanced civilizations capable of sending radio signals in the Milky Way galaxy alone. Carl Sagan later raised the figure to a million. Most—not all—astronomers agree, especially now that the first hard evidence of the existence of extrasolar planets has finally been secured. (The skeptics include paleontologist Peter Ward and astronomer Donald Browlee, whose recent book, *Rare Earth,* argues that problems involving hard radiation and a dearth of essential chemicals render life impossible just about everywhere, our planet being the happy and perhaps unique exception.)

I'm with Frank Drake and Carl Sagan there. Our local galaxy, let alone the universe, is so huge that it's bound to have some inhabited worlds somewhere in it. Even when we eliminate all stars less than three fourths as massive as the sun, which would be too dim to sustain carbon-oxygen-water-based life on any planets they might have, and those so big that they would be too hot, and those that are astronomically unstable for one reason or another, that still leaves twelve billion stars in our galaxy alone.

If half of these have planets, and half of those planets lie at the correct distance to maintain water in its liquid state, and half of those are large enough to retain an atmosphere, that leaves us with a billion and a half potentially habitable worlds in our immediate galactic vicinity. Say that a billion of these must be rejected because they're so large that gravity would

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be a problem, or because they have no water, or because they're in some other way unsuitable. That still leaves five hundred million possible Earths in the Milky Way galaxy. And there are millions of galaxies.

For forty years now we've been earnestly searching for signs that our galactic neighbors exist. SETI—the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence—is the overall label for the quest, and a SETI project now is under way to put together a twenty-five million dollar array of radio telescopes in Shasta County, California, that will be able to monitor two hundred and fifty million channels of radio signals simultaneously, in the hope that there will be, somewhere amidst the noise that comes from space, a message that says, "We are here—where are you?" And that is not the only such operation under way.

There's a big problem, though—the same one that makes actual face-to-face contact with extrasolar civilizations improbable to the point of impossibility. That is the size of the universe. The star nearest us—Proxima Centauri—is four light-years away. So any message sent to us by the good folks of Proxima Centauri would take four years to get here, traveling at the 186,000-mile-per-second speed of light. A message from the closest galaxy, the Magellanic Clouds, would require 200,000 years to arrive.

There's no way around these constraints. Despite the various lovely gimmicks that science fiction writers love to invent, the speed of light seems to be the absolute limit for any kind of message transmission.

The same limit applies to spaceships traveling between the stars—not that we're able yet to build vehicles that could travel at or near the speed of light. (A Saturn V rocket could lift a ten-ton truck and ship it to Proxima Centauri right now, but it would take half a million years to get there.)

As for the faster-than-light vehicles that make the galactic empires of Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert and E.E. "Doc" Smith possible, forget about them. They're pure fantasies, mere literary conveniences. Without them, we would never have had *Dune* or the *Foundation* books or the *Lensman* series, or any of the myriad other wonderful tales of space adventure that we love to read. But not even Messrs. Asimov, Herbert, or Smith really believed that faster-than-light travel would actually ever happen.

If we accept the speed of light as the limiting velocity of the universe—and we are verging into the realm of magical thinking when we don't—then SETI is up against the nasty probability that even if the universe is swarming with intelligent species eager to send us messages, none of them may be located within usable radio range. Consider that Earth, which is known to be an inhabited planet, needed billions of years to produce a race that was capable of exploiting the radio frequencies, and got to that point, finally, less than a hundred years ago. What if we are absolutely *surrounded* by stars with habitable worlds, but none of their inhabitants have yet attained the ability to send or receive radio messages?

Contrariwise, what if all the radio-savvy civilizations are half a million light-years away, or farther? In that case, radio transmissions that were sent this way during the heyday of Neanderthal man

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are still hundreds of thousands of years out in space, beyond the reach of SETI's antennas. Then, too, what about all those civilizations that completed the entire journey from savagery to technological supremacy to extinction three million years ago, or three *billion,* and whose jolly messages, patiently coming our way at 186,000 miles a second, will turn up on our radio telescopes far in the future, when we ourselves may not be around any longer? Even if we're still here, what will be the point of replying?

It's disheartening. I've spent five decades writing stories about other worlds and other intelligent lifeforms, and I don't like the idea that I've simply been peddling pipe dreams all this time. I *do* believe, with Metrodoros the Epicurean, that the universe is full of populated worlds. I *do* want to know what those alien races look like, how they think, what kind of cities they live in. I'd love to read alien poetry and look at alien sculptures. I might even want to risk dinner at a five-star alien restaurant. But none of that is going to happen.

The best-case scenario is that the SETI people somehow will be able, sooner or later, to detect, extract, and decode an intelligible message from another world. But that's as far as we're ever going to get, I'm afraid, in interstellar relations. The distances are too vast, and the means of transportation and communication too slow. The speed of light is going to remain the limiting velocity not just for us, but for all those lively and interesting people out there in the adjacent galaxies, and that puts the kibosh on the whole concept of a galaxy-spanning civilization.

So there won't be any Galactic Federation; there'll be no Bureau of Interstellar Trade; no alien wines or artifacts will turn up for sale in our boutiques. Nor will we meet the real-life equivalents of George Lucas's Wookiees, Doc Smith's Arisians, Fred Pohl's Heechees, Larry Niven's Kzinti, or—just as well, perhaps—A.E. van Vogt's terrifying Coeurl. The aliens are out there, I'm sure, but the sea that separates us from them, and them from us, is just too wide. *Nullus nostrum ad illos, neque illorum ad nos pervenire potest.* None of us can go to them, and none of them come to us. ❍

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NECTAR

Brian Stableford

Brian Stableford's most recent publications are the US editions of *Year Zero* (Five Star, 2003) and *Swan Songs: The Complete Hooded Swan Collection* (SF Book Club, 2003), *Kiss the Goat: A Twenty-first Century Ghost Story* (Prime Press), and a collection of translations of stories by Villiers de l'Isle Adam, *Claire Lenoir and Other Stories* (Tartarus Press). He is currently compiling a *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Literature* for Scarecrow Press.

Sara's co-parents split four against four when she asked for permission to have a rose fitted to her smartsuit. In the past, the chairperson had had the right to settle split decisions, but that had caused everyone to schedule their household motions for the week when the most sympathetic chairperson would be sitting, so they'd done away with it in April, at the same meeting when they'd voted six-to-two to let Sara handle her own credit and take robocabs unescorted. Because they'd omitted to replace the rule with any other deadlock-breaking measure, the issue was left undecided, so Sara decided to take full advantage of her newly permitted independence for the first time. She decided that everything not specifically forbidden to her ought to be allowed, and made an appointment to see the family's tailor. Then she called a robocab, went into Blackburn, and had the bud fitted.

The fitting cost more than she'd anticipated, but Sara figured that her credit would just about stretch, provided that she put an absolute block on all the shopping channels for the next month. The sacrifice seemed justified.

She hadn't said anything in the house-meeting about color or perfume, in case some haphazard aesthetic objection proved to be a deadlock-breaker, and no one had brought it up, so she assumed that her own choice would be okay as long as she didn't pick anything too obviously provocative. In the end she went for purple and a nectar called colibri—which seemed safe enough, because the only people who actually wore hummingbirds displayed them as jewelry rather than attitudinal statements.

"It'll take three months for the flower to open fully," Ms. Chatrian told her. "By that time there'll be enough foliage to protect your modesty, if

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you want to extend it that far—the stem will be long enough to arrange the leaves however you like, but it might be best to keep the shells in place for a while yet."

Sara blushed at that, although there was no need. Ms. Chatrian had been the family tailor ever since Sara was born, so she'd seen a lot more of Sara than any doctor ever had. In any case, Sara had no intention of relying on extensions of the rose to take the place of more functional accoutrements.

"It's not going to get in the way when I sleep, is it?" she asked.

The tailor shook her head. "Even when it bursts forth in all its glory it'll fold up flat into the smartsuit if you smooth it down with your hand and hold it in position. You ought to do that when you take a shower as well as when you go to sleep, and you'll have to do it if you ever need to wear a spacesuit or a deep-diving surskin."

Sara didn't think there was any possibility of her taking an excursion into space or the hidden depths of the sea in the near future, but she nodded anyway to show that she appreciated the flower's potential discretion.

"It's detachable, of course," Ms. Chatrian added, "but you'll have to follow the instructions very carefully. It can be stored indefinitely, if the right provisions are made for its nutrition. I don't suppose you've had any reason to change your suit, as yet—but it's only a matter of time."

Sara blushed at that too, although she wasn't quite sure why. The tailor knew perfectly well that Sara had only ever had one suit, which had been growing along with her since she was a babe in arms, and that she was unlikely to be extending her wardrobe for at least another three years—but it was, indeed, only a matter of time. Sara wasn't likely to get much taller than she was now—although Mother Quilla, the tallest of her coparents, was always assuring her that it wasn't too late for some judicious somatic encouragement—but she knew that she still had a way to go, personal-development-wise. The time would come soon enough when she'd need more than one smartsuit, to reflect the glorious complexity of her post-adolescent character.

The inevitable argument got under way as soon as the robocab that brought her back from Blackburn dropped her at the door, but the dispute as to whether she was entitled to select her own personal embellishments without broader consultation soon devolved into a harmless discussion about the color.

"Purple's a terrible color for a rose," Mother Maryelle opined. "At a distance, it'll look as if you're wearing a geranium."

"It's a bit dark," Mother Quilla said, although Sara couldn't see how she could tell from the fringe that was peeping out of the bud. "Imperial's all very well in broad daylight, but it won't show up well in less kindly light. You should have gone for a lighter shade. Mauve, perhaps."

"White, perhaps," Father Gustave put in, a trifle mischievously. "All girls your age should wear white."

"Except that she was born on the wrong side of the Pennines," Father Aubrey pointed out, "and she could hardly wear red, considering the kind of signals that would have given out—not to mention the fact that it

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would look as if she'd been shot in the chest. Or maybe in the back, given that it would look more like an exit-wound. It's not going to have thorns, is it? You're spiky enough without."

"Thorns," Sara informed him, with all due dignity, "are optional."

For a while, it almost seemed as if no one was going to ask about the perfume, but Mother Jolene was just waiting her turn. When Sara told her that the nectar was called colibri, Mother Jolene—who knew no foreign languages—looked puzzled, but Father Gustave, always enthusiastic to occupy the intellectual high ground, tipped her off. "French for hummingbird," he said. "Does that mean that the flower will attract hummingbirds, when it's mature enough to start producing nectar?"

Sara admitted that it would.

"Well," said Mother Jolene, with a sigh, "I suppose it's safe enough. It is sterile, I hope—the hummingbirds might be bringing pollen on their beaks."

"Of course it is," Sara assured her.

"As a matter of interest," Father Stephen inquired, "do they make a nectar that attracts suicidal nightingales?"

Father Gustave was the only one who laughed at that. He'd been one of the four who voted against the rose, but he took more interest in it than anyone else over the next few weeks—anyone else, at least, who actually lived in the hometree. Naturally, Sara took great pride in showing it off to all her classmates in webschool, where it harvested a very satisfying crop of envious admiration. One or two of her classmates weren't sure about the purple, but they were more positive about the scent, even though they couldn't actually smell it.

Gennifer's opinion was the one Sara cared about most, because Gennifer was Sara's best friend, being the nearest neighbor of her own age—her hometree was a mere hundred kilometers away in the Lake District. Teenagers weren't quite as thin on the Lancastrian ground as that distance implied—there were at least a dozen who lived in between Sara and Gennifer, perhaps as many as fifteen scattered between Blackburn and the Manchester/Liverpool Spine Road, and literally hundreds in the cityplex itself—but all the other "provincials" were slightly older or slightly younger than Sara and Gennifer, in different virtual classes.

Mercifully, Gennifer was entirely supportive, and not in the least envious. "It's a masterpiece," she said, "and it'll really suit you. The only thing sexier than wearing the very best living jewelry is wearing flowers that attract the very best living jewelry. Their visits may be brief, but they'll keep coming back. You are going to have more blooms than one, I suppose?"

"The flower's sterile," Sara told her. "I'm not quite ready for glad rags yet."

"Of course it is, darling," Gennifer came back, oozing pretended sophistication, "but there's such a thing as vegetative reproduction. Once the root and stem are fully established they can put forth as many flowers as you can support. You'll have to mind your diet, though. You're eating for two now, and one of them is a bush."

Sara realized that she hadn't thought about the nourishment aspect as deeply as she might. Most smartsuits were parasitic nowadays, because

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the old-style photosynths hadn't been able to pick up enough sunlight to power all the kinds of things that modern smartsuits were expected to do. Even Father Gustave, who was further behind the times in most respects than any of her other co-parents, wore an exceedingly smart parasitic business suit that organized his life far better than any personal robot—although the density of data projected on his outer conjunctiva meant that he was walking around half-blind most of the time.

Even though the rose's foliage would be actively green, Sara knew that she'd have to supply at least half of its energy requirements, and probably more. The larger the implant grew—whether it put out more flowers or not—the more support it would need. Quantity wouldn't be a problem, but balance might. The kinds of manna with which the pantry was stocked had no special supplements for the manufacture of colibri nectar, or for the purple coloring of the flowers.

On the other hand, Sara thought, any deficit that developed should be easily countered with a couple of pills or a flask of sap.

It would have been nice, in a way, if there had been a single day on which the flower opened—a sort of birthday, which could be celebrated by a suitable invented ritual—but the process was too gradual for any such ready marking. A whole week elapsed between the bud's first tentative opening and the full display of the flower: a week in which Sara's impatience to see the process through became almost unbearable, and brought forth a veritable flood of thorn jokes, not just from Father Aubrey but from everyone else—except Father Lemuel, who was nowadays too far adrift in virtual experience to notice anything that happened in mere meatspace unless it were handed to him, literally, on a plate. The only reason Father Lemuel wore smart clothing, so far as Sara could see, was to make sure nothing happened to his body while, as he quaintly insisted on putting it, "his spirit was on the Other Side."

In the end, though, the rose opened all the way—and it was only then that Sara realized that there would be a particular moment to mark after all: the moment when the rose was visited by its first hummingbird.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen right away, even though the perfume became so noticeable about the house that Father Aubrey began to complain.

"Take it outside, why don't you?" he demanded, when the weekly meeting broke up on the following Tuesday. "It's a nice evening, and there's just enough breeze to save you from suffocating."

"I don't notice it any more," Sara lied, blushing slightly. "If you don't like it, you're welcome to pop down to the cellar and retune the air-filters."

"There's no need," Mother Jolene put in. "The wallskin will adapt—just give it a couple of days. You didn't complain fifteen years ago when we had the nursery decked out with wallflowers, Aubrey."

"I thought they were gillyflowers," Mother Maryelle put in.

"Technically . . ." Father Stephen began—but no one wanted a pedantic sermon on the precise etymological implications of the words "wallflower" and "gillyflower." Mother Verena was quick to say: "Have you seen any hummingbirds yet, Sara?"—and when Sara admitted, by means of a

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shrug, that she hadn't, Mother Verena was quick to advise her to leave her window open so that the scent could drift, because the house would reclaim the organic compounds in preference to venting them.

That seemed like a good idea, so Sara opened her window as soon as she got back to her schoolstation, before she even called Gennifer for a chat.

"Any hummingbirds yet?" were Gennifer's first words, too, but Sara had her camera set to close-up, so there was no point in shrugging her shoulders again.

"Not yet," she said. "If we lived closer to the cityplex it would be different, but hummingbirds are thin on the ground in these parts."

"They never touch the ground," Gennifer pointed out, a trifle pedantically, "so whatever they're thin on, it isn't that."

"I'm going to open my window wide tonight," Sara added, "to give them a chance to pick up the scent—but I suppose it'll take time to drift as far as Blackburn. Sometimes, I wish my parents hadn't decided that a rural environment was best for child-rearing."

"If you think you're out in the wilds, wait till you visit me here in the summer," Gennifer said. "Isn't it too late? I mean, evening's when people want their living jewelry about their person. You might do better to open the window tomorrow morning, if it weren't for school. Maybe you'd better wait for the weekend."

Sara didn't want to wait for the weekend, but she could see what Gennifer had said about the evening not being the best time to expect other people's finest feathered frippery to be flying free, so she decided to take the next best option—which was to leave the window open all night. The most likely time of all for costume jewelry to be left to its own devices, she figured, was when its owners had gone to sleep. Unlike roses, hummingbirds couldn't just flatten themselves out.

The flaw in that plan, she realized soon enough, was that if she were actually going to witness the crucial moment then she would have to stay awake herself—which might not be easy, given the efficiency of her metabolic education. She reminded herself that she didn't have to stay awake all night, but only long enough for the first questing hummingbird to appear, and convinced herself that she could do it—or, at least, that she would wake up at the first flutter of tiny wings.

It was with that thought uppermost in her mind that she finally laid her head on her pillow, having refrained from dimming the nightlight, on the grounds that it would be no use hearing the flutter of tiny wings if she couldn't see them beating.

It was the repeated momentary eclipse of the nightlight that eventually brought her out of a light doze with a start. She hadn't heard wings because the flyers that were zooming around her room were noiseless. They weren't birds at all, nor even real bats, but mere shadowbats: "astral tattoos," as the 3V ads called them.

There were six, and they were as graceful in flight as only semisubstantial creatures could be. They spiraled and soared, dived and looped—and when they dived, they descended upon Sara's not-quite-flattened rose like swallows skimming the surface of a calm lake.

For a moment or two she thought that they were only playing, attract-

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ed more by the light than the rose, and even when she realized that they really were interested in the flower on her bosom she thought it had to be the color rather than the scent that was attracting them. After all, they had no beaks; unlike hummingbirds, they couldn't actually drink the nectar, and because they were essentially vaporous themselves, they had no need for vulgar liquid nourishment. It took her several minutes to become convinced that they really were taking the volatilized scent right out of the air, a few molecules at a time. They had neither mouths nor noses, so they were not drinking or breathing it, but they were certainly mopping it up—her own nose told her that much.

It was only a short step from the formulation of that conviction to another, which was that the shadowbats' aerial frolics were becoming more hectic by the moment. It seemed that they were not only sipping the intangible perfume of her purple rose, but also becoming intoxicated by it.

For a few moments Sara lay quite still, marveling at the unexpectedness of it all—but then a sense of violation began to build. A rose perfumed by colibri nectar should not be attracting shadowbats. None of the flowers offered by the family's ultra-respectable tailor were scented to attract shadowbats, nor were any she had ever seen advertised in webspace. The shadowbats that had invaded her room might not be guilty of theft, given that she had no enforceable proprietary rights in the scent exuded by her flower, but they were certainly culpable of some strange as yet unnamed perversity.

So far as Sara knew, shadowbats drew their nourishment exclusively from the bodies of their hosts; unlike ornamental birds and bees, they were not designed to seek out "food" elsewhere. Their flight was not supposed to be purposeful. Why, therefore. . . ?

The train of thought suddenly turned back on itself, returning to "the bodies of their hosts"—or, more likely, host in the singular, if she were only concerned with the particular flock of night-visitors turning somersaults around her nightlight. These were not just any shadowbats; they belonged to someone. In fact, they belonged to the kind of person who was likely to wear, at least some of the time, an elaborate network of quasi-Gothic "astral tattoos" . . . which was, as all eight of her parents would readily deduce, not at all the same kind of person whose idea of a fashion statement was a small flock of decorously positioned hummingbirds.

Despite the deep dent in her credit inflicted by the rose, Sara took a robocab into town on Saturday morning in order to visit Ms. Chatrian. After much thought, she had decided against telling any of her co-parents about the shadowbats in case one of the four who had supported her initial request should decide to switch sides and join a campaign to have the rose removed and put in storage until she was older.

Fortunately, Ms. Chatrian wasn't busy. Sara didn't have to sit in reception for long—which was good, because Sara always found Ms. Chatrian's reception area rather uncomfortable. It was so very clean and orderly by comparison with the rooms in the hometree that she was always anxious about leaving accidental stains on the glossy furniture or the polished surfaces of the desk and occasional table.

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"It's coming along nicely," Ms. Chatrian observed, warily, when Sara was admitted to her presence. "Any hummingbirds come fluttering round yet?"

"Two, when I got out of the cab," Sara told her. "I didn't want to hang about while they took a drink, though. There's a problem."

The real reason Sara hadn't lingered on the pavement wasn't the urgency of the problem, but a curious impression she'd had lately that people were looking at her. She'd told herself sternly that it must be her imagination, caused by the fact that she still wasn't used to being out and about without several parents forming a protective wall between her and the wider society, but she still hadn't shaken it off.

"What problem?" Ms. Chatrian asked, through slightly pursed lips.

"I left my window open on Tuesday," Sara explained, "but I didn't get hummingbirds. I got shadowbats."

"Really?" said Ms. Chatrian. "They're quite pretty when they're in flight, aren't they? I've had a few requests for sublimating accessories but they're not quite my style. Sublimation technology is progressing by leaps and bounds, so I suppose we'll all get used to it soon enough, but detachable shadows. . . . I was talking about them to your Father Stephen only the other week, and he called them 'airy-fairies from Cloudcuckooland.' It's a joke, you see. . . . "

"I know," Sara said, patiently. "The shadowbats were attracted by the scent of the rose. They were soaking it up from the air—getting drunk on it."

"I'm sure you're mistaken, Sara," the tailor said, in her most imperious adults-know-best voice.

"I'm sure I'm not," Sara countered.

Ms. Chatrian was too worldly wise to be so easily wrong-footed. "What did your parents say about it?" she asked.

"I haven't told them," Sara said, flatly. "I thought it was a matter between you and me."

"Me?" the tailor said, disingenuously. "I don't see that it concerns me. I supplied exactly what you ordered. Colibri is designed to attract hummingbirds, but what smells sweet to hummingbirds is bound to smell sweet to other things as well. Shaped sublimates may be simple entities by comparison with creatures of flesh and blood, but they need some kind of sensory apparatus to guide themselves around, and smell is the obvious one to use. If you have a complaint, you ought to address it to the manufacturers of the shadowbats—I'm sure they'll be interested to know that their nice new technology has a good old-fashioned glitch."

Sara thought about that for a moment or two, and decided—slightly reluctantly, in view of the fact that Ms. Chatrian was giving her a king-sized brush-off—that the tailor was right. If she had a complaint, she ought to take it up with the people who had made the dodgy shadowbats. If, on the other hand, she were merely curious—she hadn't quite made up her mind—the supplier would be more likely than Ms. Chatrian to give her further information.

"Which of the astral tattooists hereabouts is most likely to have supplied the shadowbats?" Sara asked the tailor. "I checked the local section

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of the web-directory, but there are six listed and I don't know where to start."

"It's not my field," Ms. Chatrian was quick to say, "but if I were you, I'd start by asking the Dragon Man. He's next door to the cocoonist's on the far side of the square, by the fire-fountain. He's quite cutting-edge, in spite of the fact that his window-display's all needles and blades, and he attracts clients interested in . . . the macabre."

The tailor smiled with undeserved self-satisfaction at her weak joke about the cutting edge, just as Father Stephen would have. Sara wondered whether Father Stephen and Ms. Chatrian had ever been more than customer and client, but it wasn't a thought she wanted to pursue just now.

Sara made the most dignified exit she could contrive, and went up the road to the square, followed by no less than four hummingbirds. This time, she had to stop to let them drink, although she felt very conspicuous doing it in the square, bathed in cool sparks from the over-energetic fire-fountain. She couldn't tell whether the passers-by who glanced at her were admiring her flower or secretly condemning her as a pathetic show-off who ought to be old enough by now to be less avid for adult attention.

Ten minutes later, she'd plucked up enough courage to go through the Dragon Man's opaque and highly decorated door. Unlike Ms. Chatrian, the sublimate technologist manned his own reception desk—which was situated in a room as different from Ms. Chatrian's tastefully sterile, user-friendly, pastel-shaded antechamber as anyone could imagine. The Dragon Man's shop was dingy and dusty, and the walls were covered in dead pictures rather than window-screens. As far as Sara could tell, the only screen in the room was the one on the desk on which the proprietor was currently resting the absurdly boot-like soles of his smartsuit.

The Dragon Man looked older than anyone else Sara had ever seen in the flesh. This presumably meant that he actually was older than anyone else she had ever seen in the flesh, because if he'd been any younger he'd have had access to far better age-retardant technologies, and probably wouldn't look a day over thirty even if he were two hundred and thirty.

Sara knew that Ms. Chatrian must have deliberately refrained from mentioning the fact that the Dragon Man was a wrinkly, although she realized when she noticed that there wasn't anything remotely like the image of a dragon on his delicately patterned smartsuit that his nickname was probably supposed to signify that he didn't measure up to modern standards of male beauty. There didn't seem to be as much of him within his extra skin as there was of most people; Sara was slightly embarrassed to be reminded of urban legends about people who wore suits so smart that they kept right on going when their wearers died, until nothing was left of the individual inside but a mere skeleton. She understood immediately why Ms. Chatrian had identified the Dragon Man as the most likely sublimate technologist in town to attract clients with an interest in "the macabre."

"Hi," said the Dragon Man, in an unexpectedly warm voice. "That's a nice rose—it really suits you. What can I do for you?" He took his feet off the desk but he remained seated. As his face came more clearly into view

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Sara saw that he wasn't literally wrinkly at all—his smartsuit had seen to that. Even so, he really did look very old. Sara had the odd impression—which was surely an illusion—that the synthetic flesh of his smartsuit was laid directly upon the bones of his skull. She had seen talking heads on 3V whose appearance was similar, but the artificiality of 3V had lent them a kind of propriety—and a kind of venerable dignity—that actual presence could not duplicate.

"Ms. Chatrian says that you're the man to talk to about shadowbats," Sara said, mustering all her courage and resolve.

"Very kind of her, I'm sure," the old man said, equably. "Knowing Linda, though, I doubt that she'd be sending you to me if you wanted a few substitute decorations in a different style. So what about shadowbats?"

Sara realized that none of her co-parents had ever used Ms. Chatrian's first name. She wondered whether that meant that, unlike the Dragon Man, they were all younger than the tailor was—even Father Gustave!

"A flock of them came into my room the other night," she said. "They were attracted by the scent of my rose."

The Dragon Man sniffed audibly. "Colibri," he said, after a slight pause. "You were expecting hummingbirds. Your first hummingbirds, at a guess. I can see how shadowbats might have been a disappointment . . . and a puzzle."

"You don't seem very surprised," Sara observed. "Unlike Ms. Chatrian."

The Dragon Man lifted his bony shoulders in what might have been a shrug. "New technology always does more than it's intended to," he said. "Shaped sublimates are designed to soak up everything they need from their hosts, but the absorption process is necessarily crude; it's not surprising that they sometimes soak up other things as well. Nobody notices, for the most part, but perfume is . . . well, more noticeable. You have to remember that they're creatures like none that natural selection ever produced, and that they don't know what they're not supposed to do. They have built-in inhibitions about settling on anyone else's surskin, but fluttering around is the name of their game. You weren't afraid, I hope?"

"Of course not," Sara said. "I knew they couldn't hurt me, even if I breathed one in. They seemed to be getting drunk, though—I wondered if they might be in danger."

"Drunk?" echoed the Dragon Man, manifesting none of the skepticism that Ms. Chatrian had displayed. "Now that would be interesting, biochemically speaking. Colibri is a moderately complex cocktail, and the metabolic systems of sublimated quasi-life are straight off the drawing-board, so I doubt if they were ever formally introduced in the lab. It must be idiosyncratic to the flock, though—there are plenty of interaction opportunities in Man/Liv, let alone London. Linda doesn't meddle much, so the scent must be standard, unless there's some weird interaction with your own metabolism—but the shadowbats would be the prime suspects anyhow, given that they're in the earliest stages of their evolution."

"Do you meddle much, Mr. . . ?" Sara had to leave the sentence hanging; she couldn't bring herself to say "Mr. Dragon Man."

"Warburton," he finished for her. "Yes, Miss Lindley, I meddle quite a bit. Old habits die hard, even when you're in unfamiliar territory. I used

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to do beautiful work, you know, when I was young. Birds, roses, hearts, mottoes . . . even dragons with gold and silver scales, with wings like angels' wings and breath like holy fire—but never Washington crossing the Delaware. I must be one of the last men alive who worked with needles, on bare skin. That's why I keep them in the window. I've always kept pace, with the organics and the smartsuits, all the way from . . . well, not quite the beginning, but at least a time when a few of us were still willing and able to stand naked when we weren't wearing dead clothes. I've always meddled. I carried the habit over when I qualified as a sublimate engineer, just as I'd carried it over into all the other retraining programs I had to go through in order to maintain the outer semblance of my career. I'm older than I look, you know."

Sara felt perversely annoyed with herself when the only thing that she could find to say in response to all this was: "How do you know my name?"

"Children are a rare and precious commodity nowadays," the astral tattooist said. "Not just to their elective parents. It used to be said that it took a village to raise a child; nowadays, I guess, it could easily take a whole city. I think you'll find that everybody in town knows your name—even people you've never spoken to, and wouldn't recognize if you bumped into them on the street. It's a quiet sort of celebrity, but it's more substantial in its way than anything brokered by 3V. You were the only one in your year, you see, this side of Kendal or Man/Liv. Think of that! No . . . don't. It seems quite normal to you, of course—but even people of your parents' ages, let alone mine . . ." He paused momentarily before going on. "We don't remember the Crash, but we remember the Aftermath. Everybody takes an interest in children, Miss Lindley. More than you'll understand, until you're much older."

There was a peculiar wistfulness in the old man's tone that made Sara feel uncomfortable. She wondered now whether it had been accurate observation rather than mistaken imagination that had convinced her that people were looking at her in the street. "Shadowbats," she said, reminding herself as well as the shopkeeper what had brought her across his threshold. "Do you know whose they are?"

"I can find out," he said, not bothering to ask whether she meant the person who had designed them or the person who had commissioned them. "What do you want me to do about it if I do?"

Sara hesitated. She wasn't sure. "Can you fix them?" she asked, faintly.

"Are you sure they're broken?" he countered.

"They're not hummingbirds," she said. "I chose colibri because . . ." She trailed off, not knowing whether the obvious continuation of the sentence was an adequate answer to the question he had asked.

Sara became aware that Mr. Warburton was looking at her with the strangest expression on his face. Smartsuits were supposed to be emotionally intelligent: to signal and signify, even better than unmasked faces, all the things that people needed to communicate face-to-face but couldn't put into words. Their role was, however, essentially supportive. If the human being within was enigmatic, the extra layers of synthetic skin wouldn't decipher the mystery.

"It's Saturday morning," the Dragon Man observed, "and you're the first

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customer I've had. I have four appointments on the machine, but they're all for this evening, after sunset. Why is that, do you think? Is it going to be bats all the way, now? Am I becoming a creature of the dusk? Sublimate entities don't have to be shadows, you know. They can be bright, like creatures of pure radiance, or even invisible. We can make fairies and ghosts. Imagine that! We could fill the world with quasi-life that we can't even see. For now, we have shadows, which only fade away at twilight, but in time, there'll be hosts of angels dancing around us in the broadest daylight, unsuspected. Or maybe we'll want to reserve the word angel for the ones that glow like haloes. I'll find out about the shadowbats, Miss Lindley. I have to respect client confidentiality, you understand, but I'll find out. If you want hummingbirds, hummingbirds you shall have. We won't let anything untoward get in their way. Trust me."

"Thanks," Sara said, lamely. She turned to go, wondering why she felt as if she were fleeing in disarray from some non-existent danger.

"When you need a second suit, Miss Lindley," the seated Dragon Man said to her retreating back, "you might want to look further afield than Linda Chatrian. She's a little behind the times. But the rose does suit you. You made a good choice."

Sara turned, as she went through the door, to say "Thanks" again, but she was too late to catch Mr. Warburton's slightly sunken eye. As she crossed the square again, though, she took a certain pleasure in thinking that the interview with the ancient tattooist certainly hadn't gone any way that Ms. Chatrian could possibly have anticipated.

That night, Sara left her window wide open again. It was simple curiosity—or so she told herself. She wanted to make sure that what she'd told the tailor and the sublimate technologist was really true: that the shadowbats were indeed intoxicating themselves on the evaporating nectar of her rose. She also wanted to take a longer look at the shadowbats themselves, in order to appreciate the ingenuity and the workmanship that had gone into the new kind of life.

She didn't have long to wait. There were six again, and she had no doubt that they were the same ones. She wondered, as she watched them fluttering around the room, whether they had returned to the hometree on the nights when she had kept her window closed, hovering invisibly outside the plastic, waiting forlornly for a treat that never came.

If so, she realized, the further encouragement that she was now providing would only serve to reinforce the habit.

She lay still on the bed, with the rose fully extended, carefully watching the aerobatic display of the living shadows, measuring its quality. Yes, all six of the bats were certainly skimming the surface of the flower, crisscrossing the space around and above the central style, from whose base the perfume was released. They were taking turns to do so, operating as a flock; they never seemed to be in the least danger of colliding, even though their flight was becoming more excited, and their trajectories more convoluted. And the scent was definitely vanishing from the air almost as soon as it was radiated, leaving only a few fugitive molecules to stimulate the sensors in her own nose.

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Were they really getting drunk, she wondered, or was that just what her webclass tutor would call "careless anthropomorphization"? Given that their physiology must be as mercurial as their presence, any similarity to the effects of alcohol on flesh and blood had to be a chemical coincidence: a mere analogy. Maybe it was more like the effects of ecstasy—either the drug or the emotion—or adrenaline or LSD. Could shadowbats hallucinate? Could they possibly have enough of a phantom nervous system to be conscious of their surroundings, even in the crude sense that insects or mollusks might be conscious of theirs?

Sara realized that it wasn't just that their flight was becoming faster, their turns and loops more hectic. Their uncertain shapes were becoming even less certain, less batlike—as if they were attempting some strange metamorphosis that they were not yet able to contrive . . . or as if they were not content to be shadow bats, but wanted to be shadow caterpillars, or shadow tadpoles . . . as if they somehow nurtured a primitive hope that drinking their fill of volatilized colibri might actually turn them into hummingbirds, giving them brightness and color instead of their fugitive mock-darkness.

Sara became slightly anxious, then. She did not want to do the shadowbats any harm—but she did want to know what was happening. On a sudden impulse she got up from the bed, sending the invaders scattering in every direction. She went to her cupboard, and rummaged among the clutter that had accumulated on its floor, until she found the ancient screw-topped jar in which her younger self had stored her kaleidobubbles.

The gelatin spheres had become sticky with age. They resisted their displacement, but she persisted until she had shaken them out into the shower-nook. Then she started chasing shadowbats with the empty jar.

At first, the dark phantoms evaded her amateurish scooping without the slightest difficulty, even though they still seemed confused and overexcited—but when she lay down again, keeping quite still, and held the open neck of the jar close to the rim of the rose's corolla, she only needed to adjust its position two or three times before the momentum of a giddy dive sent one of the shadow-creatures straight into the trap. She had the lid in place within half a second, and screwed it tight.

The captive shadowbat only needed a couple of minutes to measure out the dimensions of its cell, and to discover that there was no escape therefrom. Then it settled on the glass, as if it were a painted image, and did not move again.

The five remaining fliers seemed to realize that something was amiss. They stopped skimming the rose and fluttered around the nightlight instead, as if taking account of their number and fretting over its inadequacy. Then, very suddenly, they shot out of the window into the night, and were gone.

Sara got up and shut the window, pensively.

She went to her screen and sent a text message to the Dragon Man, telling him that she had captured one of the intoxicated shadowbats, which she would make available for his inspection on request. After a few moments' hesitation, she went to the local noticeboard and posted a pub-

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lic message, which read: IF ONE OF SIX SHADOWBATS IS MISSING, DON'T WORRY. IT'S SAFE. I'LL RELEASE IT AS SOON AS I'VE CHECKED OUT AN ANOMALY IN ITS BEHAVIOR.

Satisfied that she had done everything she ought to do, she went back to bed and smoothed the flower flat so that she could sleep unhindered by its elaboration.

When Sara got up the next morning and wandered absent-mindedly into the common room she found all eight of her parents waiting for her. She knew as soon as she stepped through the door that she was in trouble. Except for properly scheduled meetings, she had never seen all eight of her parents in the same place at the same time, and Father Lemuel rarely returned to meatspace for anything but obligatory meetings and emergencies.

"What did I do?" she asked, although she knew full well that it had to be the shadowbat. She was quick to add: "How did you know? Is my room being monitored? Or are you just keeping track of my mail?"

"The house sloth is programmed to take note of anything . . . unusual," Father Gustave told her, having the grace to look slightly shamefaced about it.

"We already knew about your visit to the astral tattooist, of course," Mother Maryelle put in.

"How?" Sara wanted to know, having decided that she had a right to be annoyed. "Did he tell you—or Ms. Chatrian? What happened to client confidentiality?"

"It wasn't either of them," Father Stephen assured her. "It's just that . . . perhaps you haven't realized how much notice people take of your movements. Not just people we know—everybody."

"People talk, you see," Father Gustave added, "and they need things to talk about. After the weather and the march of technology, children are a favorite topic. Anybody's children. Now that people are directly involved in parenting for such a tiny fraction of their adult lifespan, they tend to take a greater interest in children they're only indirectly involved with."

"'Indirectly' meaning any that they see, even on an occasional basis," Father Stephen put in, presumably resentful of the way that Father Gustave had hijacked his lecture, "or any whose existence they know anything at all about."

Sara remembered what the Dragon Man had said about taking a whole city to raise a child—and realized, belatedly, that it wasn't so much the child that needed the city as the city that needed the child. She had learned in Civics that the Population Bureau was reluctant to grant child-rearing licenses to more than eight co-parents, partly because larger groups were notoriously prone to premature disintegration and partly because of the supposed limitation of a child's primary-bonding capacity, but she had never considered the full implications of the policy. Everybody understood that strict population-limitation was necessary in a world of emortals, but that didn't mean that everybody could be—or ought to be—entirely indifferent to the rarity of children in their immediate environment.

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"You mean," she said, as the prospect became clear to her for the first time, "that wherever I go, and whatever I do . . ."

"It's temporary," Mother Quilla reminded her, "and it's discreet. In three or four years' time—sooner if you grow as fast as I did—you'll be indistinguishable from an adult by sight alone. You'll become far less visible, or far less noticeable—just as you were a few months ago, when you weren't allowed to run around on your own. You're in a difficult phase just now."

"Perhaps we should have talked to you about it," Mother Verena said, "but we thought it would make you more self-conscious if it were actually pointed out."

"None of which is relevant to the matter in hand," Father Lemuel pointed out, testily. "Which is that you can't go around setting traps for other people's bodywear."

"No it isn't," Mother Maryelle was quick to interrupt. "This isn't about the shadowbat—it's about going to strangers instead of talking to your parents."

"It isn't about that either," Mother Jolene put in. "The real issue is posting reckless notices on the public boards."

"To my mind . . ." Father Aubrey began, but he didn't have time to finish before Father Gustave shouted for quiet.

"This is not the way to go about things," he said, when he finally had their attention. "Sara, would you like to tell us what's going on?"

"You seem to know far more about it than I do," Sara observed, sarcastically. "I didn't know that I had to call a house-meeting before using a little initiative. The shadowbats aren't supposed to be attracted by my rose, and they aren't supposed to be getting high on its nectar, so I thought I'd grab one while I could so that the Drag—I mean, Mr. Warburton—could check it out and report back to the manufacturer. It's not exactly kidnapping, is it?"

She counted five frowns, but no one laid down an explicit challenge to her attitude.

"No," said Father Gustave, who still had the floor, "it's not exactly kidnapping. It's not a crime at all. It's just . . . a slight failure of diplomacy. Do you know whose shadowbats they are?"

"No," Sara retorted. "Do you?"

"Not yet," Father Gustave admitted. "I dare say that we can find out easily enough. Has the Drag—I mean, Mr. Warburton—replied to your message yet?"

Sara checked her wristpad, then said, "No. There's no response to the message on the board, either."

"Then you'd better give the jar to me," Father Gustave said. "I'll take it from here."

"It's Sunday," Sara pointed out.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"No school," Sara said. "I can take it to the Dragon Man myself."

Father Gustave opened his mouth to reply, but was overtaken by a sudden fit of doubt. His eyes flickered from side to side—not so much in search of support, Sara guessed, as to make sure that he still had a license to speak for everyone. The moment he surrendered the conversa-

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tional initiative, though, he was swamped. "No you can't," said Mother Quilla and Father Aubrey, in unison, while Father Stephen was saying "I don't think that's a good idea," Mother Jolene, "Shouldn't one of us go with you?" and Father Lemuel, "Well I'm glad that's settled."

It was Mother Maryelle who waited for a minute to let the cacophony die down before saying: "Your credit won't stretch to another two-way cab ride to Blackburn, Sara. I'm surprised it stretched to one, after what you paid for that rose."

Sara had momentarily forgotten her budget problems. Now she realized that her newly granted freedom to handle her own finances had its downside as well as opening up a wonderland of opportunity. "These are special circumstances," she said, feebly. "I mean, this is a new technology displaying an unexpected side-effect, and I'm the one who discovered it. I think you might cut me a bit of slack. It could be news. National news, even."

"As we've been trying to explain, Sara," Mother Quilla said, with an affected world-weariness that didn't suit her at all, "everything you do that's a little out of the ordinary is news, at least locally—and not in a good way."

"Not necessarily in a bad way, though," Mother Jolene was quick to put in.

"Exactly," said Sara, swiftly. "Don't you think it would reflect better on you, as parents, if I . . ."

"Don't you dare take that tone . . ." Father Aubrey began, at exactly the same time as Mother Quilla said "That's not your . . ." and Father Stephen said "That's not the point at . . ." None of them got to finish, because Father Gustave was lying in wait for another opportunity to play the tyrant; he shouted for quiet again.

"Oh, shut up yourself, Gus," Father Lemuel said, brutally. "She's right, damn it. Nothing's likely to win us prizes from the self-appointed jury of our peeping peers that passes judgment on our every move, but we can at least try not to look stupid. I'll pay for the cab if she wants to take the beastie in herself—the important thing is to get it out of our cabbage-patch and make it someone else's problem. Okay?"

Mother Quilla began to say "I don't think . . ." but it was her eyes that were flickering from side to side now. The words died on her lips as she found no conspicuous support for a tough line.

"Lem's right," said Mother Verena, although Sara guessed that she said it as much to get in a dig at Father Gustave as for any other reason.

"Well, all right," said Father Aubrey. "Jo has a point when she says that not all news is bad, and Sara has a point about showing initiative. And we did all agree that it was time she took a little responsibility for herself. Let's not get hung up about a cab fare to town. Gus?"

"If you think so," Father Gustave said, stiffly.

"Well," said Father Lemuel, with grim determination, "I'm glad that's settled. Give the Dragon Man my regards, Sara. Tell him I'll drop in one of these days, when I'm not too busy."

"I'll have my breakfast first," Sara said. "In my room, if that's okay." In the absence of any manifest dispute, she assumed that she was free to go, and she wasted no time at all in turning on her heel.

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While she ate her breakfast she called Gennifer. Their conversation about the total unreasonableness of parents far outlasted the meal, and might have gone on for another hour if her screen hadn't posted a flag telling her that she had a message from Mr. Warburton waiting to be read.

Sara pasted the message into a window and reported its contents to Gennifer. "You shouldn't have done that," she read aloud, "but since you have, you'd better bring it in as soon as you can. Text me an ETA. Give my regards to Lemuel and Jolene and say 'long time no see.' See you soon. Frank Warburton."

"Very Frank," Gennifer observed. "Fancy your Mother Jolene knowing a tattooist. If it's been a long time, their acquaintance must predate the sublime stuff, and maybe smart cellulite too. You don't suppose that he ever stuck needles in her, do you?"

"No," Sara replied, before signing off. "I certainly don't."

The cab had to drop her on the far side of the square, so Sara had to walk past the fire-fountain, where no less than three groups of parents were holding aloft infant offspring of various ages—surely a record for a Sunday morning in Blackburn—but she didn't feel nearly as conspicuous as she had the day before. With that sort of competition, no one was likely to be staring at a teenager—or so she told herself.

The Dragon Man was waiting for her. He was standing up, and she felt a slight shock when she saw how short and frail he was. He took the jar from her and peered at the dormant shadowbat, but he shrugged his shoulders almost immediately.

"Can't tell anything by looking," he said. "Need to do a complete proteonomic analysis and chromo trace. You want to watch?"

Sara was mildly surprised by the invitation, which she accepted with alacrity.

"Better come through," he said, leading the way into an inner room.

Sara wasn't overly surprised to discover that the sublimate technologist's workroom had as little in common with Linda Chatrian's consulting-room as the his reception area had with the tailor's. The labtop equipment was similar, except for the absence of the vats where the tailor grew her embryonic smartsuits, but the decor was completely different. Ms. Chatrian liked whiteskin walls and a lightly perfumed but reassuringly sterile atmosphere; she also went in for large windowscreens and Morris chairs upholstered in royal blue and chocolate brown. The Dragon Man's walls and furniture were stone dead and his wallscreens were more like portholes than casement windows. Unlike Ms. Chatrian, the Dragon Man obviously liked shelves. He had lots of shelves, filled with jars charged with what looked like colored smoke, in every imaginable hue, but obviously wasn't. The air was loaded with a rich cocktail of barely perceptible odors—as was only to be expected, given the lack of smart walls—and there was more clutter than Sara had in her cupboard piled up in each and every corner, giving the room a curiously rounded aspect. The labtops were clean, though, and the equipment was all primed and ready to go.

Sara half-expected the shadowbat to make a bid for freedom as soon as

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the screw-top was released, but it remained quiescent, and had to be prompted with the point of a long needle before it condescended to slide onto a sheet of smart gel. Once it had left its biochemical imprint there Mr. Warburton coaxed it on to a rag of synthetic skin and let it feed before transferring it to yet another hyperactive surface, into which it seemed to dissolve entirely, leaving nothing on the surface but a faint and rather cartoonish outline of a bat in flight.

"Right," said the Dragon Man. "Let's see what we've got. The full proteonome analysis will take a couple of hours, at least, even though the poor little devil only has a few dozen pseudogenes, but the chromo-trace should tell us soon enough if there's anything untoward going on, and maybe offer a few clues as to how and why." His fingers danced on a virtual keyboard projected on the desk in front of one of the screens, and a series of diagrams appeared. Sara knew that they were way ahead of anything she'd studied in biochemistry, but she did her best to look as if she were taking an intelligent interest.

"Well," said the Dragon Man, after yielding a slight sigh. "I guess I should have known it would be my fault. See this?"

Sara could indeed see where his finger was pointing, but what it was pointing at she had no idea. She nodded her head anyway.

"It was only a little tweak," he said. "Strictly speaking, the client should have had a second smartsuit, or reduced the apparatus on the one he had, but you know what kids are. They always want more gadgets than synthetic flesh will readily bear. You're sensible enough to take things easy, of course. A nice, tasteful rose. Still different for boys, I guess. More masks, more hardware, more party tricks. Competition takes different forms, you see."

"I'm sorry," Sara said, plucking up her courage at last, "but I don't have the least idea what you're talking about."

Mr. Warburton turned to look at her, his face registering dutiful surprise. "Oh," he said. "Sorry. I'm out of touch with the modern curriculum. You're still on natural genetics and genomics, I guess—you haven't got to grips with boring old artificial photosynthesis yet, let alone sublimation technology. How can I simplify it? The proteonome analysis"—he pointed to the surface into which the shadowbat had sunk—"will eventually produce a complete record of all the molecules in the pseudocloud. The chromogel, on the other hand"—he pointed to the other tray—"is tuned to register anything anomalous and give me a quick indication of molecular weight and type. This trace here"—he pointed to the screen again—"is the fly in the ointment, except that in this case, it's more like the sticky stuff in the flyer. I'll have to wait for the proteonome register to get the full story, which probably won't have its tees crossed and its eyes dotted till teatime, but this kink here is enough to help me figure out the vague outlines of what must have happened.

"The problem with sublimate organisms, you see—one of the problems, that is—is that they're a trifle oversensitive. The downside of ultrasimple alimentation is a mile-wide toxicity-spectrum. There was a strong possibility of quasi-allergic reactions to one or two of the client's other suit-based systems, so I tweaked a couple of the pseudo-genes to strengthen

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the sublimate's permeability barrier—its smokeskin. I did wonder why the manufacturers hadn't done it themselves. Now I know. The molecular latticework that serves to keep more bad chemicals out also serves as an absorption-trap for some not-so-bad ones . . . one of which must be a key component of the artificial nectar designed for cosmetic hummingbirds to drink—whose effects on the pseudocloud, once it becomes concentrated there, is . . . well, intoxicating's as good as word as any. Oops. Do you think they'll take my tweaking license away? I've had it more than a hundred years, you know, although I've had to update it three times and only had it modified for sublimates three years ago. I was in business for well over a hundred before I got it, but there's no demand for the older technics nowadays."

"You don't sound very worried," Sara observed.

"No, I don't," the Dragon Man admitted, turning back to his graphs. "I lost my ability to sound worried a while back. I'm still trying to figure out whether my ability to worry went with it, or whether it's so hard to give a damn because there isn't much worth giving a damn about when you get to my age. I could die any day, you know. You have no idea how smart this suit is, or how much help it has from all the deep cyborgery I've taken aboard, but nothing lasts forever—especially when it's done as much ageing as I have. With luck, Miss Lindley, you might really be emortal, but I was born too soon. If I thought I had a serious chance to be Achilles' ship I'd be happy to be the guinea pig, but Achilles' ship didn't have a brain."

"You can call me Sara," Sara told him. "What's Achilles' ship?"

"An old conundrum. Achilles' ship kept going in for repairs. The hull was patched up time and time again, the mast replaced, and then the keel . . . until there came a time when there wasn't a single one of the original timbers left. Compared to the original, it was a completely new ship—but when, exactly, had it ceased to be the old one? I've had quite a few replacements myself, and if I thought I could go on living by replacing every bit of natural flesh I had with some ultra-modern synthetic, I'd go for it . . . but I'm not stupid enough to think that it'd still be me, even if I couldn't put my finger on the moment that I'd ceased to be."

Sara frowned in concentration, trying to work out the implications of what the old man was saying. Old age wasn't a phenomenon she had ever had to confront before, and this was the first time she had had to wonder what she might feel like in three or four hundred years' time.

"But you wouldn't know you'd changed," she said, hesitantly. "You'd still be you, even if it wasn't quite the same you as before. We all change, but we're always the same person."

The Dragon Man nodded his head thoughtfully. "That's true," he said. "I forgot for a moment how young you are—and how young I once was. You must be far more aware of the ceaselessness of change than most of the people I get in here. But the problem is that I do know how much I've changed, and I really do feel that I'm ceasing to be myself. My synthetic organs don't have the same capacity for feeling that your real ones do—no matter how hard the techs try to duplicate the emotional orchestra of hormonal rushes and neural harmonies, the music never comes out quite right. Maybe my memories of how life used to feel are tainted by nostal-

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gia, but the fact remains that I don't feel that I'm the person I used to be. Maybe it's as much illusion as reality, but I already feel half-dead . . . which is not something I ought to be talking about with a guest, especially a guest as young as you, Sara Lindley. So let's get back to the original question—to which the answer is no. I don't really care whether the regulatory authority takes away my license to fit augmentations to smartsuits. I wish you hadn't trapped the shadowbat, though. Once you'd done that, I had to look. Ignorance ceased to be an option. Discretion went out of the window with the rest of the flock."

"I shouldn't have sent you the message," Sara said, feeling suddenly awkward because she'd made the Dragon Man say things he thought he ought not have said. She was glad he'd said them, though, because she took it as a compliment that he had forgotten for a moment how young she was. Her parents never did that. "I shouldn't have put the other one on the noticeboard," she added.

Frank Warburton set his fingers to the virtual keyboard again and began tapping. Sara couldn't help but notice that his fingers were far less agile than they should have been, given the centuries of practice they'd had. "Don't listen to me," the Dragon Man said, eventually. "You didn't do anything wrong. In fact, you were probably right to seize the opportunity. We all needed to know. Better sooner than later. I suppose they might go easy on me if I report it right away, and turn in a detailed account of the anomalous effect. They might even find a use for it. Anyway, it really doesn't matter. You'd better forget what I said about boys, though. That was indiscreet."

"You didn't tell me his name," Sara pointed out. "In fact, you never actually said, in so many words, that your client was a he. You just made a few general remarks."

"I remember when Lemuel was a boy," the astral tattooist said, with a wry smile. "And Jolene, when she was a girl. The others didn't grow up around here. God, I've been here such a long time. Got lazy as well as old. Try not to do that, Sara, if you can possibly avoid it."

"Get lazy?" Sara queried, because she genuinely wasn't sure.

"That too," he said, meaning that what he'd really been advising her not to do, if she could avoid it, was to get old. She realized—realizing, too, that it was the latest in a long string of crucial realizations that she had made during the last few days—that for her, if not for him, it really might be a matter of choice.

"I'd better go," Sara said. "My parents will be keeping an eye on the clock. I don't want them to worry."

"I know," the old man said. "I shouldn't really have asked you to stay, and I certainly shouldn't have rambled on like that—but what the hell. They took away my child-rearing license before the Aftermath was over, when kids were still as common as . . . what's common these days, Sara? I lose track."

"I don't know," she answered, truthfully.

"I'll make sure the shadowbat's reunited with its flock," the Dragon Man told her, after unleashing the longest and deepest sigh that Sara had ever heard. "I'll square things with the owner and the manufacturer, just as soon as the proteonome analysis has told me the full story. Got to

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be scrupulous now—but I ought to be glad for the distraction. I'll let you know how it all comes out. Thank Lem for me, won't you?"

Sara nearly asked what for, but stopped herself just in time. She had worked it out. "I wanted to come myself," she said. "I insisted."

"I know," the Dragon Man replied. "When I was your age, I'd have insisted too."

That night, Sara left her bedroom window shut. Her rose had been visited by four more hummingbirds while she crossed the square after leaving the Dragon Man's shop, and she might have fed a dozen more if she had cared to wait, but she hadn't. The hummingbirds were beautiful, but she had too much on her mind to appreciate them fully. She'd called Gennifer again as soon as she got home, to tell her the whole story of her adventure in the Dragon Man's lair, but Gennifer had been more interested in the fact that Sara's rose would soon be guaranteed bat-unfriendly than any of the slightly more somber thoughts that were casting shadows in the depths of Sara's mind. Her parents, too, had welcomed the opportunity to be relieved that her troubles were over, and had gone their separate ways again. Sara had never taken note before of the remarkable fact that eight adults could so easily vanish into the woodwork of their home.

She had descended through all the phases of sleep into a peaceful oblivion when she was summoned back by a peculiar noise. The hometree's walls were smart enough to deaden almost all the sounds that disturbed the night on a routine basis, but it couldn't cope with the racket made by small stones hurled at her window, which made the plastic fabric reverberate like a sullen drum.

At first Sara just lay dazedly in bed, assuming that the house's sloth would take whatever action might be necessary to cancel out the disturbance, but once she became capable of curiosity she was seized by a sudden urge to find out what was happening.

She got up, and went to the window. The security lights were on, but they hadn't deterred the stone-thrower. He was standing outside the garden's boundary, so he hadn't triggered the kind of trespass alert that might lead to criminal charges, but his aim was remarkably good. He had set the face of his smartsuit into an opaque mask, but the slightness of his figure, in spite of its evident maleness, suggested that he couldn't be much older than Sara, and might easily be a year or two younger.

Sara opened the window, and said: "What do you think you're playing at?" She had to raise her voice slightly to be heard, but she didn't shout. She didn't want to wake any of her parents, if the house hadn't done so already. She ducked her head, unnecessarily, as a cluster of shadows suddenly materialized around it, zooming around as if they were orbiting her upper body.

"I want my shadowbat," the boy replied, also restraining his voice while trying to make sure that it was audible to Sara. "You had no right to trap it. You have to let it go."

Sara considered various possible replies before saying: "How did you find out where I live?"

"How do you think?" he retorted.

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She deduced that the boy had followed the five shadowbats, who had indeed got the habit of making for her abode in search of stimulation, even in the absence of an alluring odor—or, at any rate, that he would not admit to having done anything else. Hacking addresses from public noticeboards was a standard challenge to all apprentice webweavers, all the more attractive by virtue of its theoretical illegality.

"You're too late," she told him. "I took it to the Dragon Man. He has it now. He said he'd call you when he'd finished working out what he did wrong."

"That's a lie!" the masked boy said, without the slightest hesitation. "You have to let it go—now."

"I'm not lying," Sara protested. "Why would I? I took it into town this morning." She recalled the image of the shadowbat sinking into whatever quicksand Mr. Warburton had used to take census of its molecular makeup, and wondered now whether the process might have dissipated its ghostly substance so thoroughly as to have destroyed it—but she could not imagine why, if so, Mr. Warburton would have let the boy believe that she still had it imprisoned.

"I called the Dragon Man as soon as it went missing," said the shadowy figure beyond the garden fence. "He promised me that he'd let me know as soon as it came in, if it did come in."

That promise had certainly been broken, Sara knew. The old man hadn't made a call while she was in the shop. Had he forgotten? Or had he been so grateful for her temporary presence that he had put other obligations out of his mind? But she hadn't stayed very long, and at least ten hours had passed since she left the shop. She glanced at her wristpad; it had flattened itself out when she went to bed, but the time-display was always readable.

Eleven hours and at least ten minutes had elapsed since she had stepped out of the shop. Sara had no idea how much work the Dragon Man still had to do to complete his analysis, although he had mentioned hours and had certainly seemed to be so fully absorbed in the task that he might not have recalled his promise to call the owner of the shadowbat . . . but it was something else that he had said which echoed in her mind now, as she groped for an explanation for the breakdown in communication.

I could die any day, you know.

Was it possible, Sara wondered, that he had spoken more truthfully than he knew? It certainly seemed plausible.

She turned away from the window, and went to her desk. The Dragon Man's number was in the sloth's memory now, so she only required a couple of keystrokes to make the call. When Frank Warburton's face appeared on the screen, looking considerably fuller and healthier than it had that morning, Sara sighed in relief—but then she realized that the image was a sim, and that she was addressing a sloth. "I'm Sara Lindley," she said. "I need to talk to Mr. Warburton in person. It's urgent."

"That's not possible at the present time," the sloth replied, the Dragon Man's image obligingly miming the words. "If you care to leave a message . . ."

Sara knew how literal sloths were, and the phrasing sent a chill into her heart.

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"It must be possible," she said, although she knew that her insistence was, in this instance, quite impotent. "This is top priority . . . emergency . . . red alert . . . whatever the keyword is. I have to speak to him *now*."

"That's not possible at the present time," the sloth repeated—and this time, Sara let herself take in the full significance of the statement.

"Do you mean that he's dead?" she asked, flatly.

The image flickered slightly as a new subroutine kicked in. "I can't be reached at present," the sim said. "I'm not at home. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Shit," Sara murmured. She turned on her heel and ran back to the window.

The boy was still there, waiting. His posture signaled annoyance and impatience.

"Hey, Kid Cracker," she called to him, a little louder than was strictly necessary. "How do I get a sim to tell me whether its maker is dead?"

The boy's mouth was already open, poised to utter a complaint, so he had no difficulty at all looking astonished. "You think the Dragon Man's dead?" he said, too amazed now to object to the form of address she had used.

"How do I get his phone sim to tell me, one way or the other?" Sara demanded.

"You don't," the boy replied, mechanically. "You ask local news. Do you know how old the guy was? People like him are rarer than little girls like you—and they aren't making any more of his kind."

Sara didn't bother to react to the "little girl." She had more important matters to attend to, and he was only retaliating. She cursed herself for having been so stupid as to have to ask, but she went back to the desk and called up local news

There was nothing in the banners, so she typed Frank Warburton's name with an open query. When she read the terse message that came up she didn't know whether to be relieved or not. She went back to the window, because she felt she had to share the news with somebody, and there was only one person readily available who wanted and needed to know.

"He's in the hospital," she told the boy. "He never had a chance to call you. He's comatose. Stable but unconscious."

The boy didn't reply for a few moments. Then he said: "They'll switch him off. Bound to. He's too old. They'll give it a couple of days, then they'll let him go."

"No," Sara said. "He was okay. This morning, he was okay. His brain's fine. It's just a matter . . ."

She trailed off as she heard her bedroom door open, and looked around. Mother Quilla appeared, then Mother Maryelle, but there was nobody else. Obviously this wasn't—as yet—an occasion that required parental mob tactics.

"What's going on?" Mother Quilla demanded.

Sara suppressed the reflex that instructed her to say: "Nothing." She was, after all, no longer a little girl. "It's Frank Warburton, Mother," she said. "He's been taken to the hospital. I was probably the last person who talked to him."

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"And you felt compelled to broadcast the news to the empty night, I suppose?" Mother Quilla said—but it was Mother Maryelle who was elbowing Sara out of the way in a conspicuously unmaternal manner so that she could peer out of the window. When Sara glanced backward she saw that the boy had vanished from sight, presumably having ducked down behind the fence, but she knew that it would do no good. The home-tree had eyes and ears aplenty, although no one ever bothered to interrogate their records unless they had a reason.

"What's his name?" Mother Maryelle demanded, obviously thinking that this was a matter requiring intricate bilateral parental negotiations. "Where does he live?"

"I don't know," Sara muttered, in a forlorn tone. "It really doesn't matter. Not now."

In the event, it took ten days for the hospital's Ethics Committee to agree with representatives of the Neuroanalytical Unit that Frank Warburton's brain was no longer in any condition to maintain his personality, no matter how many neuronal reconnections the surgical team's nanobots contrived to restore. Once that was admitted, no further discussion was necessary. He was "released" within the hour. Sara understood well enough what the euphemism signified when local news, obedient to her desk-unit's programming, broke into the middle of a history lesson. It meant that the machines maintaining the semblance of life within the old man's faded flesh had been withdrawn, and stood down to await more profitable duty.

Sara had already learned from publicly accessible records that Frank Warburton was—had been—two hundred and eighty-two years old. It wasn't a record, even for Blackburn, let alone Lancashire or England, but there weren't many people of that age who had still been hard at work when consciousness was eclipsed for the last time. There had, apparently, been no other who had clung to what was effectively the same profession—in spite of at least half a dozen transformative technological revolutions—since his twenty-first century teens. That small element of uniqueness enabled the report to make the national news, carefully colored by the uniquely respectful kind of melodrama that was typical of modern obituaries.

According to the text Sara read, Frank Warburton had collapsed while conscientiously analyzing a mistake that he had made as a result of his overadventurousness in trying to meet the requests of a client who was too young to have sufficient credit to have the job done properly. Apparently, Frank Warburton had always been willing to take short cuts, especially on behalf of the very young. This particular mistake had thrown up some interesting information regarding previously unnoticed possibilities inherent in sublimation technology, which might increase the utilitarian potential of "shaped sublimates" considerably.

Sara's name was not mentioned in connection with this matter, nor was anyone else's.

"That's so unfair," Gennifer told her, when school was finally over and they were able to go one-to-one for an intimate exchange of views. "You were the one who made the discovery, not him. They're only making him

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out to be a hero because he's dead. If he were still alive they'd have called him an irresponsible tamperer and taken away his license."

"Which would probably have killed him," Sara said, not being at all certain that it hadn't been exactly that prospect that had tipped the scales. "He deserves the credit. He did the tweaking, and he figured out what it was that he'd done. Anyway, responsible people who only do what they're supposed to do, like our faithful family tailor, never discover anything. It's the people who don't follow the instructions who make progress."

"Very big of you," Gennifer said. "Personally, I'd have made a fuss. You might not be entitled to any royalties, but you could have made the national news."

"A quiet kind of celebrity," Sara informed her, oozing mature sophistication, "is more substantial, in its way, than anything brokered by 3V."

"Are you going to the funeral? They say it's going to be big. A man that age knows a lot of people—my Mother Leanne says that she and Father Jacob both met him, although Father Jacob claims to have forgotten all about it. I wish my parents would take me, but they won't. You and I will still have to wait for summer for our first meeting in meatspace."

"Yes," Sara said, when she was finally able to get a word in. "I am going. I'll be in the Hall, in fact."

Gennifer was impressed. "How did your parents wangle that?"

"They didn't," Sara said, proudly. "I might not have made the national news, but I was a witness to his last hour—that's how the organizers put it. When I say I'll be in the Hall, that's what I mean. Just me. Not even Father Lem, although he's known the Dragon Man for centuries, off and on, and he's determined to be in the memorial garden in the flesh even though he's practically a cocoon-junkie nowadays."

Gennifer was now beyond being impressed; she was awestruck. "My God!" she said. "Imagine how many women wearing hummingbirds there'll be at a do like that! Thousands!"

"They won't be flying in the Hall," Sara reminded her. "There's such a thing as decorum. In fact, they won't be flying in the memorial garden either. It says so on the invitation, in so many words. All mobile accessories to remain fixed for one hour after the revelation of the memorial stone."

"Why?" Gennifer asked.

"Decorum," Sara repeated, with all the dignity she could muster. "it's a funeral, not an eight-way marriage or a naming day." Even as she said it, though, she remembered seeing funeral ceremonies on the 3V in which the memorial gardens had been filled with flocks of colored birds, which couldn't possibly have been natural. Perhaps, she thought, the Dragon Man had left special instructions.

"Lucky you had that rose fitted, isn't it?" Gennifer observed.

"Is it?" Sara said. "He's dead, Gen. I don't call that lucky."

"He'd have died anyway. This way, you get a front seat at a really big funeral. You didn't kill him, you know. It wasn't your fault he was working on a Sunday morning, and even if he'd been cozily cocooned at home he'd still have pegged out on Monday."

"It's still not lucky," Sara insisted. "It's just not the right word. Father Gustave says that it'll be good for me to make the intimate acquaintance

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of death, but that's not right either. It's not luck, and it's not good. It's . . . well, I don't know what it is, but there is such a thing as decorum."

"So you keep saying. Well, I envy you. I won't say enjoy yourself, given that you've come over so sensitive, but you still have to tell me the whole story, in more detail than you tell it to anyone else, okay? We're sisters, remember—or as close as anyone ever gets to being sisters nowadays, or ever will again."

"Sisters," Sara repeated, glad to find a word that sounded right in the circumstances in which she found herself. Technically, Gennifer was right; now that all children were born in artificial wombs, from eggs and sperm dutifully deposited in the bank by parents who'd been far too polite to exercise their right of replacement while they were still alive, it was unlikely that the earthbound would ever again produce any biological sisters, although things were different in the Lagrange colonies. If the earthbound ever did produce any more biological sisters, it was unlikely in the extreme that the sisters in question would be alive at the same time—but that only meant that the word "sister" had been liberated, and was now free to acquire new meanings. Yes, she and Gennifer were sisters, in a brand new sense that made the fact all the more remarkable and all the more exciting.

"I'll tell you everything," Sara added, when Gennifer made no further response to her echo. "Everything."

The indoor funeral ceremony was rather tedious, in Sara's opinion. It might have been more interesting if the information about Frank Warburton contained in the various eulogies had been new to her, but by the time the big day came she'd been trawling the web for days and she probably knew more about the man than any mere human acquaintance could possibly remember. The eulogists had probably consulted the same sources, but propriety demanded that they pretend to be speaking from memory as well as from the heart, so the word-pictures they painted were mostly as hazy as shadowbats in the dusk.

In spite of her determination to remain focused, Sara found her attention wandering. She never went so far as to stop thinking about the man whose absence her presence was supposed to be honoring, but she did take leave to wonder how much of his work was on display in the solemn crowd.

There were, as Gennifer had prophesied, an inordinate number of hummingbirds among the living jewelry on display. They were not merely perched on dozens of shoulders like fancy epaulettes but clustered around dozens of elaborate headdresses and occasionally distributed in meticulously linked flocks, Escher-fashion, around the voluminous billows of the most ostentatious costumes Sara had ever seen in meatspace—but none of these, Sara felt sure, were Frank Warburton's work. In his youth, when "tattoos" really had been tattoos, his work might have seemed garish to some—especially when he inscribed brightly colored birds—but by today's standards a sublimate engineer was a subtle artist, whose works were exceptionally discreet.

Unlike the females in the audience—all but a few of whose embellishments made Sara's purple rose seem modest in the extreme—the males

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had set their smartsuits to black, mimicking the formal mourning-dress of old. Even if a few shadowy sublimates had been allowed to cling to such costumes—while brighter fairies and angels were hidden away, along with the more substantial produce of former fashion-eras—they were quite invisible.

There was not a dragon to be seen anywhere in the room, and certainly nothing flamboyantly pictorial, in the vein of Washington crossing the Delaware.

"He's not here," Sara murmured, too quietly for anyone else to hear—not even Linda Chatrian, who was sitting beside her playing chaperone. Sara savored the layers of meaning within the phrase. Frank Warburton was, indeed, not here; that was why the funeral was taking place. But he was not present, either, in the eulogies that were being offered, turn and turn about, by people who had known him well a hundred or two hundred years before. Nor was he present in the hundreds of smartsuits gathered in the Hall to which he must have made some decorative contribution. It was as if he had been buried—not literally, even though he was the product of an era when the dead had sometimes been buried—but buried in the minds of his closest friends beneath turbid layers of forgetfulness, and buried in the second skins of all his myriad clients by stubborn strata of fashion and convention.

Sara felt a new significance in the fact that she had been "a witness to his last hour." She felt, in fact, that by virtue of that freak of chance, she had come as close to Frank Warburton—as close, that is, to the person he had been at the moment of his death—as anyone.

She had looked around for a boy who might be the one who had lost the shadowbat—the one who had trekked across country for what must have been miles to confront her at the window through which his Gothic emblems had been mistakenly lured—but she had not found one. That seemed to her, now, to be slightly unjust. The boy had, after all, been the catalyst that had brought her together with the Dragon Man, thus allowing her to form a unique bond with him, quite unlike any she had formed with her various parents.

In the meantime, the eulogists droned on.

"This is pointless," she murmured. Again she spoke silently—or so she thought, until Linda Chatrian said "Sssh!" loudly enough for at least half a dozen of their neighbors to hear.

Sara blushed, and bit her tongue. After that, she hardly dared to form a coherent sentence in the privacy of her own thoughts, for fear that it might escape and attract the censorious attention of the whole crowd. Fortunately, the eulogies had not much further to run, and the indoor part of the ceremony was concluded soon enough.

It seemed to take forever for the crowd to file out through the doors of the Hall. The weight of the occasion made every step ponderous, and engendered an excessive politeness whenever two people came into competition to occupy the same space—with the result that spaces that could have been put to perfectly good use often went begging for thirty or forty seconds, until someone finally accepted the necessity of moving into them ahead of whoever who was gesturing them forward with ever-increasing urgency.

Sara was one of the last to leave, although Ms. Chatrian made an os-

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tentatious display of ushering her out in advance of her own venerable presence. Ms. Chatrian was wearing neither flowers nor avian jewelry, although she had not gone so far as to manifest herself in masculine black. She was clad in all the colors of precious metal, from platinum white through gold to burnished copper—all of which seemed to melt as she moved. Sara had never before thought of Ms. Chatrian as anything less than the perfect embodiment of grace, deportment, and fashionability, but she was close enough now to detect a certain stiffness of limb and awkwardness of gait that had to be symptoms of aging, and it was all too obvious that the tailor's sense of what was in vogue really had fallen behind the times. Sara knew now, because she had checked, that Linda Chatrian was more than two hundred years old—much older, as Sara had earlier speculated, than any of her parents.

Sara had rejoined her parents before she caught sight of the boy, but she would not have dared to approach him in any case. There were at least a dozen boys in plain sight who were obviously between the ages of twelve and sixteen, but as soon as she locked eyes with him she had no doubt at all which of them was the boy who had lost the shadowbat. The fact that she was able to meet his eyes so forthrightly was highly significant in itself; all the other boys were aware of her presence, and every single one of them looked longer and harder at her than at any of the fourteen or fifteen other girls in the same age-range, but none of the others met her gaze in the same knowing way as the boy who had recklessly thrown stones at her bedroom window.

He was a very ordinary boy, at least a year younger than she. Sara knew that she only had to ask her parents what his name was. Even if they had made no effort to discover the identity of their unexpected nocturnal caller, they would recognize at least some of his parents, and they would know his name for exactly the same reasons that Frank Warburton had known hers. She didn't ask. There would be other opportunities, soon enough, to discover who he was, and why he was so keen to wear bats in the twilight that he had persuaded Frank Warburton to customize some for him. This was neither the time nor the place.

"How was the ceremony, Sara?" whispered Mother Verena. There was a screen on the outer wall of the Hall, and another on the top of the hill on which the memorial stones were ranked, so Mother Verena and everyone else in the larger crowd had been able to see the eulogists in close-up and hear every word they had to say, but that wasn't the point.

"Very moving," Sara lied, as she was obliged to do.

Linda Chatrian was still close enough to favor her with a sharp glance, but the tailor said nothing—as she, in her turn, was obliged to do.

"They're about to unveil the stone," said Father Gustave. "What took you so long?"

"No they're not," said Father Lemuel. "It'll take another ten minutes for all the people from the Hall to get into position."

"The stewards are having a terrible time trying to distribute the newcomers," Father Aubrey observed.

"I can't think why they're being so fussy," Mother Quilla said. "Why does everything have to be just so?"

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"It's because they're men," said Mother Jolene. "Old men. Very hierarchical. Everyone wants the exact spot that was allocated to him. Men at the top of the hill, women at the bottom. The trouble with living so long is that attitudes no longer change at the same pace as technology."

"They never did, Jo," said Father Lemuel.

"Well, Lem, the gap's getting wider every day," Mother Jolene came back. "Let that be a lesson to you, Sara. You may be living in the twenty-fourth century, but all those old fogies elbowing one another out of the way on the crest of the hill will never get out of the twenty-first, even if they manage to live till the next double-zero year."

"They're not all old," Father Stephen pointed out, punctiliously.

"They are all men, though," Mother Maryelle put in, as if she'd only just noticed.

"Not all," said Mother Quilla, ever avid to match Father Stephen in pedantry. "Just because they're almost all wearing black, it doesn't mean that . . ."

Mother Quilla stopped in mid-sentence, partly because of the shock and partly because her pedantic judgment had just been overtaken by events. The people gathered in orderly ranks at the top of the hill were no longer wearing black—not all of them, at any rate. They had activated metamorphic transformations preprogrammed into their smartsuits, and they were undergoing a spectacular collective transformation.

It would have been even more spectacular, Sara judged, if they had coordinated their timing a little better, but they were too many for that, and there was still too much confusion about exactly who was supposed to be positioned exactly where. Father Lemuel's ten-minute estimate proved, in the end, to be conservative. Even though it had now become obvious that something was afoot, the minutes dragged on and on as the people making ready continued to make ready, chiding one another for inept timing while they continued to jockey for position.

Long before the display progressed to its next phase, Sara had worked out what was going to happen—but that only made waiting for it all the more testing. She understood now why the invitations had specified that all detachable decorations were to remain attached for an hour after the revelation of the memorial stone.

At the moment when the stone was finally revealed, Frank Warburton's work took to the air.

Because a little of Mother Quilla's and Father Stephen's pedantry had rubbed off on her, Sara knew that it couldn't really be *all* of Frank Warburton's work that was taking to the air, because shadowbats and other flyers had only been a tiny part of his relatively recent endeavors. By far the greater part of what survived of the Dragon Man's long labor was bound into the real and artificial flesh of his customers and other miscellaneous living canvases . . . and what survived could only be a tiny fraction of what he had done. Most of his accomplishments were lost in the infinite obscurity of the discarded past.

But what remained was spectacular nevertheless.

There were shadowbats by the thousand, and shadowbirds and shadowbees. There were fireflies, firebirds, and fairies. There were angels and par-

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acletes and UFOs and kites, flying fish and flying flowers, flying snakes and flying pigs. And there were dragons. Most of all—because they were so large, so imperious, and so magnificent, and because he had, after all, been a Dragon Man among Dragon Men—there were dragons. Some were red and some were gold. Some were royal blue and some were imperial purple, and some were every color under the sun, not to mention quite a few that defied the sun to illuminate their mystery . . . oh yes, there were dragons.

The most remarkable thing of all, however, was not their presence, nor their number. It was the quality of their flight.

Sara had thought it remarkable that six shadowbats could form a flock, co-ordinating their own movements—even when intoxicated—with the movements of their fellows, so that as they ducked and dived and soared and swooped and swerved, looped the loop and curled and whirled themselves into shapes as improbable as their formations, they remained a kind of unit. People, as she had just witnessed, could not organize themselves as economically and as gracefully as that even while they were shuffling about at less than walking pace. Here, though, was a flock whose members must have numbered in the tens of thousands, and whose species must have numbered at least a thousand . . . and yet they were flocking together, maintaining a collective identity as a cloud of clouds: a supercloud as disciplined in its flight and its momentary metamorphoses as a crystal, despite the fact that it was as energetic as a flame.

There was nothing hectic about the astounding host; it was more orderly than any flicker-winged flock of solid birds, more graceful than any multifinned school of silver fish. Even the light and the dark that danced around one another as the shadow-creatures mingled with creatures of pure light seemed perfectly ordered: solemn in spite of its celerity, decorous in spite of its delicacy.

Sara remembered how the shadowbats, once drunk on the nectar of her rose, had become even vaguer than artifice had intended, as if they were attempting to change into something other than bats. None of the individuals in the cloud that soared and streamed above Frank Warburton's monument like a cross between a hot-air balloon and a fluttering banner was drunk, and none was attempting to become something other than it was, but the whole formation seemed far more than the sum of its parts, in versatility as well as substance.

It was only vapor, Sara knew. The entire host had no more mass than a storm-cloud. But the vapor was almost alive, and no matter how stupid its individual elements might be, the whole had a kind of intelligence, manifest in the way it played so cleverly and so exuberantly with light and color. It was beautiful, and it was unprecedented. There had never been a display like it in the history of humankind. Given the furious pace at which technology continued to advance, there would probably never be another with quite the same balance of naïvety and sophistication.

Sara remembered what the Dragon Man had said about her being far more aware of the ceaselessness of change than most of his clients, and what he had said about knowing how much he had changed, and the extent to which he had lost the sense of being his true self. She wanted to believe that if he had been here, he would have been able to recognize his

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true self in that marvelous flight of angels, bats, and dragons, and know that it had not been lost even though he could no longer embody it.

She took particular care to remember the words that Frank Warburton had regretted having spoken—the words that had revealed more of himself than seemed polite at the time. He had told her that synthetic organs did not have the same capacity for feeling that real ones did, because biotechnology had not yet progressed to the point at which its practitioners could duplicate the emotional orchestra of hormonal rushes and neural harmonies accurately enough to make the music of real life come out right. She wanted to believe that the vast cloud of clouds pirouetting above her head was dancing to the music of real life, and coming out gloriously right. Maybe it was as much illusion as reality, but she could see the Dragon Man himself within the cloud, no longer half-dead and half-alive, but complete in life and death alike.

Sara did not feel in the least ashamed of herself because she could find nothing to say, after three full minutes of the miraculous display, except: "He's here, after all. He is." She did not feel the need, given that it was so obvious, to add the judgment that the funeral had been anything but pointless. Nor did she trouble to add the observation that even though lucky and good would have been entirely the wrong words to use, she was uniquely privileged to be where she was, and who she was, at this particular moment in time.

Afterward, although it did not seem that an hour had passed, the hummingbirds came. There were thousands of roses on display, hundreds of which must have been designed to generate colibri nectar, but far more hummingbirds came to visit Sara's rose than any of the others. She understood the reason why, and did not want to dispute its adequacy.

She was young.

People wanted to look at her, and welcomed an excuse to do so a little less discreetly than they usually did.

It was a temporary thing, she knew. In a year or two, it would pass. But in the meantime . . .

She enjoyed every minute, all the more so for knowing that she would be able to renew the sensations, and savor them anew, when she reported to Gennifer everything that she had sensed and felt, within and without.

Mingled with the hummingbirds, always outnumbered but never quite invisible, was a little flock of shadowbats, which moved with more stately precision than they had in her bedroom, because there was too much competition for her nectar to allow them much intoxication.

Sara counted the shadowbats carefully, hoping that there were six, but there were only five. In the confusion surrounding the Dragon Man's removal to the hospital, it seemed that no one had retrieved the sixth one from the medium into which it had been dissolved for proteonomic analysis.

Compared with the death of a man, it was a very tiny loss.

When she caught the eye of the shadowbats' owner for one more brief second, though, Sara knew that in spite of their extreme youth they both understood very well that no loss of life was too trivial to be mourned, even—perhaps especially—in a world of human emortals and artificial ghosts. ○

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EMBRACING-THE-NEW

Benjamin Rosenbaum

The author—who had been living in Basel, Switzerland (working in the "steely Swiss heart of capitalism"), for the past four years—has just returned to the Washington, DC, area with his wife and three-year-old daughter. Mr. Rosenbaum wrote "Embracing-the-New" during the first week of Clarion West 2001, and would like "to thank and salute my fabulous classmates and teachers there—particularly that week's instructor, Octavia Butler—for their invaluable help with the story." His tales have appeared in *F&SF, Harper's, Infinite Matrix, Strange Horizons, McSweeney's, LCRW, Quarterly West,* and *Vestal Review.* The address for his website is *http://home.datacomm.ch/benrose*.

The sun blazed, the wagon creaked and shuddered. Vru crouched near the master's canopy, his fur dripping with sweat. His Ghennungs crawled through his fur, seeking shade. Whenever one uprooted itself from his body, breaking their connection, he felt the sudden loss of memories, like a limb being torn away.

Not for the first time, Vru was forced to consider his poverty. He had only five Ghennungs. Three had been with him from birth; another had been his father's first; and the oldest had belonged to both his father and his grandfather. Once, when both of the older Ghennungs pulled their fangs out of him to shuffle across his belly, sixty years of memory—working stone, making love to his grandmother and his mother, worrying over apprenticeships and duels—were gone, and he had the strange and giddy feeling of knowing only his body's own twenty years.

"Vile day," Khancriterquee said. The ancient godcarver, sprawled on a pile of furs under the canopy, gestured with a claw. "Vile sun. Boy! There's cooling oil in the crimson flask. Smear some on me, and mind you don't spill any."

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Vru found the oil and smeared it across his master's ancient flesh. Khancriterquee was bloated; in patches, his fur was gone. He stank like dead beasts rotting in the sun. Vru's holding-hands shuddered to touch him. The master was dying, and when he died, Vru's certain place in the world would be gone.

Around Khancriterquee's neck, as around Vru's, Delighting-in-Beauty hung from a leather cord: the plump, smooth, laughing goddess, twenty-seven tiny Ghennungs dancing upon her, carved in hard gray stone. Khancriterquee had carved both copies. How strange, that the goddess of beauty would create herself through his ugly, bloated flesh!

Khancriterquee's bloodshot eyes twitched open. "You are not a godcarver," he croaked.

Vru held still. What had he done wrong? The master was vain—had he noticed Vru's disgust? Would Khancriterquee send him back to his father's house in disgrace, to herd fallowswine, to never marry—hoping, when his own body was decrepit, to find some nephew who would take pity on him and accept a few of his memories?

"Do you know why we have won these territories?" the master asked. Pushing aside the curtains, he gestured over the wagon's side at the blasted red crags around them.

"We defeat the Godless in battle because the gods favor us, master," Vru recited.

Khancriterquee snorted. "It is not that the gods favor us. It is that we favor the gods."

Vru did not understand, and bent to massage the master's flesh. Khancriterquee pushed Vru's holding-hands away with a claw and, wheezing, sat up. He stared at Vru with disgust.

Vru realized that he was clicking his claws together, and forced himself to stop. The master watched him—remembering Vru's every twitch into the Ghennungs the journeymen would soon carry.

Vru pulled himself erect. "Master, there is something I have never understood."

Khancriterquee's eyes glittered with interest, or suspicion. "Ask," he said.

"How can the Godless really be godless?"

The master frowned.

"I mean, how can someone without a god not go mad when he takes new Ghennungs?" Vru remembered the day he had taken Delighting-in-Beauty as his goddess, to be the organizing devotion of his life. As the doctors had gently separated the Ghennungs from his father's cooling corpse in the Great Hall below, he had wanted to cling to childhood, wanted to wait before choosing a god. But the priest had lectured him sternly—for without a god, a person would just be a shifting collection of memories. The allegiances, desires, and opinions of his various Ghennungs would be at war, and he would be buffeted like a rowboat in a hundred-year's storm.

"Ah, my apprentice is ambitious," Khancriterquee whispered. "The master is old and weak. Perhaps the apprentice should attend the high military councils in my stead. Perhaps he should learn the secrets of our war against the Godless—"

"Master, I meant no—"

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"The Godless do not trade Ghennungs," Khancriterquee said.

"What?"

"Perhaps at a very young age they do," Khancriterquee said, waving his holding-hands, "or they trade certain very specific skills only, without other memories, using some kind of mutilated Ghennungs. We are not certain. But in general, when they die"—he paused, watching Vru's reaction—"their Ghennungs are destroyed. That is why we win the battles. Their greatest soldier is only as old as his body."

Vru suddenly felt sick; bitter, stinging fluids from his stomach sputtered into his throat. The Godless intentionally murdered themselves when their bodies died!

"Now I will tell you why you are not a godcarver, if the ambitious apprentice has time to listen," Khancriterquee said. He tapped the Delighting-in-Beauty around Vru's neck with his claw. "Carving copies, so that the people will not forget their gods and go mad, is nothing. It is time for you to carve a new god, as I did when I carved Fearless-in-Justice, as my grandfather did with Delighting-in-Beauty." He lay back on the furs and closed his eyes. "It will be a monument, to be unveiled at the Festival of Hrsh. You will use this new green stone."

Vru watched in silence as the master slept. He could hear his own heart beating.

None of Khancriterquee's journeymen had been allowed to create a god, not even Turmca. Why let an apprentice? To embarrass and spite the journeymen—to punish their eager impatience for Khancriterquee's death? Or did the master think Vru had that much talent?

The Bereft worked in the new mines, carving the green stone from the cliff face. Their fur had been shaved, because of the heat. Many of them had bloody claws, torn by the stone. Vru tried to look away. He had rarely seen so many Bereft. Their bodies were muscular, powerful . . . and naked of Ghennungs. It was horrible, yet there was something about those empty expanses of skin that called to him, like a field of untrodden snow.

The green stone glittered, embedded in the gray rock. Khancriterquee had been yelling at the foreman all day. Why use the idiot Bereft? They understood enough to be useful in the older mines, with the older gray stone. But this wonderful new green stone, in which so much detail would be possible—the perfect stone for gods, won from the Godless—was difficult to extract, and they were incapable of learning to do it. They had ruined every large piece so far.

"They are useless! Useless!" Khancriterquee screamed at the foreman. "Why could you not get real people?"

"It's mining," said the foreman stubbornly. "Real people won't do this work, holy one."

"Vru! Useless boy! Standing around like one of the Bereft yourself!" Hatred glittered in the master's eyes. "Bring that one to me," he said, motioning to a great Bereft body working dully in the nearby stone, cracking precious nodes of it into two with every swipe of its claws.

Vru led it to the master. It was docile; he only had to touch it lightly with his claws, on its strange, bare flesh. The Bereft panted softly as it

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walked. Its claws were torn, and it looked hungry. Vru wanted to embrace its mighty body in his holding-hands, murmur words of comfort in its ear—insane, stupid thoughts, which he tried to ignore.

"Bend its head over to me," Khancriterquee croaked.

Vru pushed it down to kneel by his master. Was the master going to whisper something to it? How could that help?

As the foreman stood nearby, dancing angrily from one foot to another, Khancriterquee slid his ancient claws against the soft fur of the Bereft's neck. The Bereft stared solemnly, fearfully, back. Straining and grunting, Khancriterquee closed his claws, tearing through the skin. The Bereft jerked, shuddered, and let out a piercing scream; the foreman, cursing, rushed forward; and then there was a snap and the head of the Bereft rolled from its body, which collapsed onto the ground. Blood poured onto Khancriterquee.

"Are you mad?" yelled the foreman, forgetting himself. Then terror came over his face and he dropped to the ground, burying his face in the dust. "Holiness, please . . ." he moaned.

The master chuckled, pleased perhaps that his body's old claws were still capable of killing. He clacked them together. The blood was black. Then he scowled. "Bring me some real people to work this mine," he said. "These abominations are worse than useless."

Vru vomited onto the dust.

"You need whole stone for your monument!" the master said. "Stupid boy. Now clean me."

The green stone was a miracle. On a calm blue day a month later, with whorls of fog skating across the ground and drifting into the sky, Vru stood in the sculpting pit of Khancriterquee's compound, before the monolith brought from the mines. Carving it was like a dream of power; it sang under his claws and under the hammer and file in his holding-hands.

For the last weeks he had returned to the dormitory only for the evening meal and to sleep. This work was altogether different from the work of making copies of the gods. Khancriterquee had been right; until now, Vru had never been a godcarver, only a copyist. Now, a new god was taking shape beneath his claws.

When Vru looked at the new god, he felt as if he had a thousand Ghennungs, with memories as old as the Ghennungs of the Oracle. He would never, himself, poor castle-builder's ninth son, dare to sculpt anything so shocking and so true. It was a god working through him, he knew, but not Delighting-in-Beauty; a new god, a god only he knew, was using his claws to birth itself into the green stone.

The god, he had decided, was called Embracing-the-New. It was a terrible and wonderful statue. In it, a person naked of Ghennungs, like one of the Bereft or a banished criminal, stooped to touch a Ghennung upon the ground with his claw: gently, a caress. Vru knew that in the next moment, the person would take up the Ghennung in his holding-hands and bring it to his chest; the Ghennung would sink its fangs into him, finding blood and nerves; and the sweet rush of memories would burn into the person's consciousness: the first thoughts, the new identity.

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Vru looked down at his holding-hands; they were shaking. He did not feel tired; he felt like singing. But it had been twenty-nine hours since he had rested. He could not risk a mistake.

He pulled a cloth over the god, and walked up the trail toward the dormitory. As he left the sculpting pit, the embrace of the god faded, and weariness crept through his limbs. He could barely keep his claws up.

As he passed through the empty spring pavilion, a shadow moved ahead of him. He stopped. From the darkness, he heard ragged breathing.

"Who's there?" he said.

Turmca the journeyman stepped out into the daylight.

Vru relaxed. "You frightened me, Turmca!" he said. Even as he spoke, he noticed that Turmca was not wearing Delighting-in-Beauty around his neck, but Fearless-in-Justice, the soldier god. "Why are you—?"

The journeyman took a shuddering step toward him. His eyes were strange, vacant. Was he drunk? "How are you, Vru?" he asked. "How is your *work?*" Turmca's claws snapped together, and he jerked as if surprised at his own movement.

"Are you well, Turmca?" Vru asked, taking a step backward.

"How kind of you to ask," said Turmca, taking uneven steps forward. Vru moved backward into the pavilion's yard. Turmca was smaller than Vru, but well fed, with muscles from years of godcarving.

"I wanted to ask you," Vru said, "Turmca, when the master, ah, passes away, would you, have you considered taking me on? I would be grateful if—"

Turmca barked out loud, shuddering laughter. He bent over, put his claws against his eyes, and his body shook. Then he looked up at Vru.

"They all go to you," Turmca said.

Vru blinked.

"Khancriterquee said so to the Master Singer. I overheard. You will bear all his Ghennungs. He does not want his memories weakened and dispersed among the journeymen, or rather, he says, that is not what Delighting-in-Beauty wants."

"Turmca, that's insane. I don't have the talent. . . ."

Turmca's claws snapped open. They gleamed, newly cleaned and sharpened. "Talent! You fool! He doesn't choose you for your talent! He chooses you because of your five feeble Ghennungs and your weak, malleable nature. He wants to live on as himself, that's all! Your memories will be no trouble to him!"

Turmca's right foot slid back, and his holding-hands came in to cover the Ghennungs on his chest. Vru had seen that stance before, when his brother Viruarg was drilling. It was a soldier's stance.

"Turmca—"

Vru leapt backward as Turmca struck, but too slow—the points of a claw opened gashes in his side. Vru had not fought since he was a child playing thakka in a dirt field. He bent low and then lunged forward, checking Turmca's claws and trying to slam his body into him. But Turmca spun away, and his holding-hands darted out to smack against Vru's ear fronds. Vru's legs gave way and he collapsed to the ground, pain washing through him.

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Turmca wasn't fighting like an amateur: he must have borrowed or rented Ghennungs from a soldier. He wasn't drunk. His glazed look was that of one who has not integrated his Ghennungs, who has a battle in his soul. But he was united enough in his desire to kill Vru.

"Get up, Vru," barked Turmca, and it was a soldier's voice, the voice of a follower of Fearless-in-Justice, who wanted a kill with honor. And then in a gentler voice, the voice of the journeyman instructing a young apprentice: "I'll make this quick."

Vru felt exhaustion flooding through him, singing in his muscles. If he cried out for help, he knew Turmca would kill him and be gone before help came. He heard Turmca's feet scuffing cautiously toward where he lay on the sand. Goddess, help me, he prayed.

But it was not Delighting-in-Beauty who helped him—it must have been the new god, Embracing-the-New, who wanted to be carved, for he did something that Vru could not, would never do. Embracing-the-New picked Vru's body up and flung it at Turmca, and Vru's claw lashed out and severed the cord that held Fearless-in-Justice around Turmca's neck. Turmca, godless, screamed. Vru grabbed the god as it fell and threw it into the darkness of the pavilion. Turmca's claws reached for Vru, but his body turned and lurched after his god. Vru ran to the master's compound.

Vru returned from a week of fasting on the day of the Festival of Hrsh. He was weak, but he felt purified, ready for his task. When Embracing-the-New was unveiled, he would finally win honor for his family.

He sat on the stage, next to Khancriterquee. In front of them stood the monument, hidden by a cloth. Vru longed to see Embracing-the-New, but he could not, until the god was revealed. Suddenly he wondered what the people would see. A Bereft or a criminal as a god, reaching for a forbidden Ghennung! If the god had not carved it through his hands, he would be appalled himself. He trembled—what if they did not see the hand of the god? What if he had carved heresy? He tried to focus on Delighting-in-Beauty, to let her center him as a potter centers clay upon the wheel. But his head swam with images. The strong and lovely Bereft who had worked the green stone; the bloody head, rolling in the dust of the mine pit. The Godless and their strange, evil customs. He imagined the Bereft of his statue, reaching out to greet them. He sat stiffly, his head full of strange thoughts, until it was time.

The priest was calling him. He jerked out of his seat, stumbled across the stage. All around, the audience strained forward. A few people hushed children, then all was still. He reached up and pulled the cloth from Embracing-the-New, and a cry went up from the crowd.

But it was not Embracing-the-New.

The form was the same; it was his own block of green stone that he had lovingly carved. But into the figure's flesh were carved the distinct bulges of Ghennungs: seventeen Ghennungs, a new number for a new god. And the reaching claw was not caressing a fallen Ghennung; it was crushing a tiny Godless soldier with his claws aflame.

In the stone were the bold, smooth strokes of the master's hand.

The people applauded. Vru turned to look at Khancriterquee.

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The master's jaws were drawn up into a satisfied, indulgent smirk. I added that which you forgot, his eyes said. It was not bad work, but the message was not correct. I corrected it.

What does it matter, Vru imagined Khancriterquee saying. What does it matter? He gazed at Vru smugly. You have proved yourself worthy of me. Soon this body will collapse, and you will carry my Ghennungs. All my memories, all my power. We will be one person. And then we will carve as Delighting-in-Beauty guides our hand.

Vru could smell, faintly, the decaying odor of Khancriterquee's skin from where he stood. The master was dying, but the master would not die. He would not even change much. Vru knew his five weak Ghennungs would be no match for Khancriterquee's sixteen, his own memories dim whispers in a roaring. Some would perhaps be weeded out, for twenty-one is too many for even a young body to carry. Something might remain: Vru's industriousness, perhaps, his love of textures in the stone. But when he thought of Khancriterquee cutting off the head of the Bereft in the mines, it would be sixteen loud voices of satisfaction, perhaps three of weak dismay.

He should be happy. His god was Delighting-in-Beauty. Why should he not rejoice that the greatest godcarver of the Godly would work with his muscles, his claws, creating grandeur? What did it matter if his memories were dissipated? He remembered seeing himself as a mewling baby in his mother's holding-hands: a ninth, unwanted son. He remembered stroking his mother's brow as she held the infant. "There will be no inheritance for him," she had said. "We will find something," he had said. "Perhaps the priesthood. He will have one of my Ghennungs." "Two," Mother had said. He had scowled down at the crying, wan baby and thought, two? For this scrawny fish?

Vru endured the applause and shuffled back to sit beside Khancriterquee. The stench was overpowering.

This scrawny fish will never make a soldier, his father had thought.

I would rather be Godless, Vru realized. I would rather die once, and then fully, than become Khancriterquee.

"Let the verdict of the Oracle be pronounced for all to hear," cried the herald. "The crime is treason, heresy, and attempted desertion to the enemy. The body is not at fault, and will be spared, but is unfit to bear memory. Let it be banished to the wilds. Generous is the Oracle."

They held him, but Vru would not struggle. He was limp and sweaty. He looked at his chest; how strange not to see Delighting-in-Beauty there. He felt like a child again.

He kept seeing the false Embracing-the-New, as he had left it, with its Ghennungs broken off. Had he killed a god? But it was a false god, a monstrosity!

The doctors teased a Ghennung from his flesh. He watched as it burned in the brazier, twitching. A strange, hissing scream came from it. Fear filled his guts like a balloon expanding. They took another Ghennung, the one that had been his grandfather's. What had his grandmother looked like? He could only remember her old. How sad, how sad. She had surely been beautiful young. Hadn't he often said so?

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They took another. He needed a god, a god to center him. But he could not think of Delighting-in-Beauty. He had betrayed her. He thought of Embracing-the-New, the real Embracing-the-New, the figure bereft, reaching for hope. Yes, he thought. They took another Ghennung. It blackened and twisted in the fire. Vru, he thought. My name is Vru. They reached for the last Ghennung. Embracing-the-New, he thought, the body of green stone. Remember.

The beast stood in the courtyard. The wind was cool, the forest smelled like spring. There would be hunting there. Others were holding him. They smelled like his clan, so he did not attack. They let him go.

He looked around. There was one horrible old one who stank, who looked angry, or sad. The others brandished claws, shouted. He hissed back and brandished his claws. But there were too many to fight. He ran.

He headed for the forest. It smelled like spring. There would be hunting there. ○

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SONGS THE SIRENS SING

Mary Rosenblum

In 1988, Mary Rosenblum attended the Clarion West Writers Workshop. Since then, she has published more than fifty short stories, three science fiction novels, and a hardcover collection of her short fiction—*Synthesis and Other Realities* (Arkham House). Her novella, "Gas Fish," won the 1996 Readers' Award from *Asimov's,* and was a nominee for the Hugo award. Ms. Rosenblum has also written a mystery series for Berkeley as Mary Freeman, with four "Rachel O'Connor" novels in print. She recently returned to writing short fiction, and has new stories appearing in both *Asimov's* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. The author lives in rural Oregon where she trains and shows dogs in obedience and tracking, raises assorted livestock, and grows most of her own food, when she isn't writing or teaching for the Long Ridge Writers Group.

Abrim looked down, watching the pitted surface of the type-C asteroid rise up to meet their silver ship-feet.

Setting down, Miriam murmured in his ear, twin-mind to those feet. *Light as a feather, brother.* Abrim twitched as their silver pad feet touched down on hard rock and soft dust, raised puffs like smoke that drifted up and slowly away from the rock's surface in the negligible gravity. His thighs tensed as their legs flexed, muscles and alloy reacting to the small shock of landing.

"Down," they said together, and shut the engines down. Abrim lifted the VR mask from his face, pulled off the gloves, and stretched, because every landing was stressful, no matter how many times they'd done it together. You only got one mistake out here in the Belt. "Smell any water, Miriam?"

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Lots, his ship replied smugly. *If we drop a full bonus load down to the Platform, you can afford that new solar engine and refit for us. Then we kick dust in everybody's face out here.*

Abrim chuckled. Miriam might be a cloned-core model, an organic CPU crafted from his own DNA, but somehow she had grown up with a drive to succeed that he had never felt.

Take a look, bro, she said brightly. *This one's pretty.*

He put the mask back on and looked out through the hull of the miner. She was right. The little 'roid was all edges and razor promontories of gleaming rock, worked by the forces between stars. A small and delicate spire of white crystal closed his throat briefly because it was . . . beautiful. And no sentience had shaped it.

Drilling, Miriam murmured in his ear. *Not only beautiful, bro, but I think her heart is pure gold.*

She. Miriam always referred to the 'roids as "she." He'd asked her about it once, but she had shrugged off his question and laughed at him. *What is gender to me, bro?* she had said. *That's your fixation, not mine.* But they were always "she."

He had taken the mask off again, but he still felt the probe biting down into the heart of the asteroid, as if it was part of him, connected to his belly somewhere, a long proboscis, like the extinct honeybees of old Earth had had, extending down to suck the priceless nectar of this frigid rock.

Sometimes he wondered if he had been too long on a miner, if ship and flesh, mind and clone-core could merge into a whole.

Score! Miriam's triumphant shout sent him leaping for his mask. *This C-type's just a big bag of rock full of frozen water. New engines, here we come! Hey, bro, keep an eye out for our pirates.*

Her words dimmed his pleasure in their find. In the last few months, three miners had vanished without a trace. He scanned surrounding space, saw nothing but bits of rock drifting in Sol's grip. He looked down, seeing with the ship's eyes, feeling the bite of the drill bit as it sank into frozen water. Below, the asteroid appeared as she had said—a shell of rock around a deep heart of ice. Ice. White gold up here in the belt, the precious fuel that drove the steam-powered miners' ships and kept the orbitals alive in their delicate dance above the surface of old Earth.

Oh, bro, we can fill all the bladders on the spider and drop down to New Paris Platform well in time to earn the bonus. They're paying the most. Aren't you impressed with my nose?

"Nose, shmoze." But he laughed and slapped the virtual console that floated in front of him. "You know we did it by luck."

Luck, shmuck, she countered, her laugh chiming with his. *So let's get to work, bro.*

They didn't waste any time. Their pad feet anchored securely, they extended the collection tube down the drill-bit's shaft, penetrating the 'roid's frozen heart of nearly pure water, melting the ice with a jet of steam from the ship's engine. Abrim did a scan as the first flush of liquid water whooshed up the tube. It was old water. Older than Earth, perhaps, carrying the imprint of ancient suns. This asteroid had been a wanderer. You found them here in the belt. The old ones, captured by young Sol,

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trapped here after millions of years of aimless meandering. He checked the angle of the solar panels, monitored the temperature of the high pressure steam flowing down the tube from the fuel bladder, and let himself hope. This could be the bonanza to put them over the top for the year. And they needed it. They had finally paid off the loan from his brother and they were both ready for some repairs.

He looked up, masked, watching the ship's cargo balloon inflate overhead and checking again for intruders. They had left the storage spider in a fixed orbit above the tiny planetoid. When the ship's bladder had filled with rapidly re-freezing water, they'd ferry it up to the spider, attach it, and return to fill a new one. When they had filled all eight balloons, they'd drop the spider down the gravity well to New Paris. Melted and sprayed out into space in tiny droplets, the ice would act as a shield to insulate the orbital city from Sol's latest impending eruption.

New Paris was offering a hot bonus for miners who brought in water within the next five-day, before the predicted Solar storm. Much more than mere drinking and manufacturing water brought.

New engines for Miriam, yes. And maybe a couple of days Downside for him. How long had it been since he had dropped down to Earth's surface? A long time. Trips down to Earth—and more importantly up again—cost. And there really wasn't anything down there for him anyway. No, he'd probably bank the extra credit and just take a couple of days in lunar Darkside.

Miriam was humming to herself, an old Sephardic melody he recognized and couldn't name. Where had she learned it? he wondered. Surely tunes didn't come woven into the DNA. Sometimes, the things she knew scared him, just a little. The bladder was nearly half full, its silvery skin bulging as it bloomed into a bright sphere. He checked the furled wings of the solar mirrors beneath them, monitored the level of water in the fuel pods, aware of the steam rushing down into the heart of the tiny planetoid, aware of the liquid surge of the newly melted water, its leap up the tube and its reluctant return to ice.

Another hour and we can lift this, Miriam sang. *Oh, bro, we're so hot on this one. Uh oh.* Her tone sank half an octave. *Trouble coming in range.*

Pirates? Adrenalin leaping, he looked up. "Shimon." He recognized her tone, now, recognized it again in his own voice as he spoke his brother's name. "What in hell is he doing slumming out here? This isn't M-type territory."

Social call? Miriam tinged her tone with irony. *Fuel stop, want to bet, bro?*

"C'mon, Miriam." Abrim let his breath out in a long slow sigh. "He staked me to the credit that paid for you."

He charged you good interest for that loan, too. Wasp-sting tone. *Don't give it to him this time. Not until he pays for the last three fill-ups.*

"M-types are hard to find. And he's paying off that new inorganic schizcore ship of his. State-of-the-art costs. He'll pay." Abrim took off his mask to silence her reply, expecting to hear it anyway, over the ship-speakers. He didn't, and that made him wince just as much as her reply would have.

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"Hey, Abe!" His brother's voice came over the hail-link, loud as a shout. "What luck, running into you out here! Hey, you got your head down in the ice? You there?"

Abrim clenched his teeth, unclenched them. "I'm here, Shimon. What's up?" He slipped his mask on slowly and blinked as his brother's ship materialized around him in flowing curves of silver light. The schiz-core ship had overridden his own interface and brought him onboard in virtual, without a ripple of interference from Miriam.

"Welcome." Shimon grinned at him, boyish as ever, his dark eyes dancing with excitement. "You've never been on a real ship, have you?"

"I haven't been on *your* ship, no." Abrim wanted to be angry. The last couple of times Shimon had come around, it was just to refuel. He hadn't even offered Abrim a tour. He wanted to say something, but . . . Shimon was just . . . Shimon. He was the one who had climbed to the top of the new-date palm at the camp, swaying up there against the sun and dry blue sky to drop clusters of ripe dates down to Abrim. Later, Shimon was the one who had owned up to stealing the genened dates from Al Absalim and had taken the lashes from him, without ever mentioning Abrim. He still carried the scars. "It's . . . amazing," he said, looking around, and he meant it.

Shimon leaned back in a cradle-couch that shimmered as it remolded itself constantly to the shape of his body. Most of the ship's interior was made of smart-alloy that accommodated itself to the occupant's every move. Sit down, and the floor would rise to cradle you softly. Put a stylus or a plate down and a silver hand would rise to take it. Abrim squashed a small pang of envy and felt immediately guilty, as if he'd been unfaithful to Miriam.

"I tell you, Abe, you need to trade that old junker of yours in for one of these new models." Shimon waved a dark slender hand at the sleek console in front of him. "Once you've finished your training year with these new molecular cores, they behave just the same as you would in an emergency, even if you're not able to direct them. It's like you and the ship are telepathic, only it's not that. The ship thinks exactly like you. Pretty cool. You think about doing something, and the ship's already doing it. If you get in trouble, the ship thinks for you. Not like an organic core that's going to argue with you, or wait until you tell it to blow its nose." He gave his brother a crooked smile. "Or has what's its name stopped doing that?"

"Oh no." Abrim smiled crookedly. "Miriam's never going to stop arguing with me. She doesn't need to blow her nose."

"How can you call it a she when it's created from your own DNA, little brother?" Shimon grinned. "Or have you been hiding something from me all these years?"

"It would have been hard to hide much." Abrim laughed, glad to see his brother, even if he was only there to "borrow." "I don't recall we wore a whole lot. So what do you need? Fuel?"

"Well, the Egyptian sun is pretty darned hot for clothes. And now that you offer." Shimon winked, at ease, his smile the same one he'd used when he'd come 'round to borrow Abrim's savings for a down payment on his state-of-the-art new ship. "I could use a load of ice on credit."

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"You can have whatever you need." Abrim winced, as if he could feel Miriam poking him in the back with a laser fingernail. "How much?"

"Well, I'm pretty empty." Shimon settled himself in his seat, grinning. "But I don't need all that much. Two tanks, maybe. That should be enough. Did you hear about Cho?"

"Yeah." Abrim stood straight, forgetting the virtual softness around him, heard Miriam's hiss in his ear. "Third steam trainer this year," he said. "We've been looking over our shoulder the whole time out."

His ship was found near here, Miriam murmured in his ear. *Coordinates.* A 3-D map-layout formed in front of his eyes, overlaying the plush bridge. So Miriam was still on board.

Yes, I'm here. She sounded cross. *His fancy core can override the visuals, that's all. He's not so hot. Don't give Shimon any ice. One of these days you have to say no to him.*

"I knew it was close." Very close. Abrim swallowed. Quiet ship, empty and drifting. "Pirates," he said.

"Not pirates." Shimon shook his head. "He had a half million in refined metal in his bladders. I . . . uh . . . stumbled over a tight-beam chat he had with Darkside." Shimon was trying for a casual expression, but a hard triumph gleamed through it. "It was an accident, of course, and he has kindergarten encryption. So I know what he found and where." The triumph-light grew, like flame behind his eyes. "An M-type gem, Abe. Solid iron, nickel, cobalt—a big 'roid made up of natural stainless steel. And it's all mine."

Abrim's eyes narrowed. "You were eavesdropping?" The words came out hushed, as if someone might overhear.

"Who, me?" Shimon's eyes mocked his expression. "Did I say that?"

"They'll airlock you, if you get caught." Frontier justice. It was tough enough out here without theft from each other. Which was why the vanished miners had spooked everybody. Abrim reached for Shimon's arm, banged his knuckles on his own control panel. "Shimon, leave it alone."

"Cho doesn't care any more." His brother's expression hardened. "I'm not going to pass this up. I've had rotten luck since I bought the core." He stroked the lush curve of the chair-form cradling him. "I've hit rock, rock, and more rock in every M-type I've probed. I'm behind in the interest right now. I can't go back in without enough to pay that up. Why do you think I come begging ice, little brother?"

Abrim looked away, swallowing at the raw note of desperation in his brother's voice. He had never heard that tone before, not even when they were running from the attack that leveled their village. Not even then.

"Nobody's gonna know I eavesdropped. Unless you tell them."

Abrim jerked his head around to face his brother, stunned, flushing as anger flooded in to dull the pain. "You can fill your tanks as soon as I dock this load of ice," he said through clenched teeth. "Take all you want. Fill all your damn tanks."

He ripped the mask off, threw it across the small space.

"Abrim, wait a minute." Shimon's face wavered and tried to take shape on the small flatscreen set into the control panel. "I didn't mean . . ." The screen went blank.

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If he wants to apologize he can damn well come over here and do it in the flesh, Miram's voice snapped from every speaker in the module.

"Something's really wrong." Abrim pressed thumb and forefinger against his closed eyes, a headache nibbling at the back of his brain. Really wrong, he thought. Not just debt. Shimon didn't care about debt. "Let's get this load of ice coupled and fill Shimon up. If I work without breaks, we can make up the load and drop in time for the bonus."

Miriam gave him a pregnant silence, but the ship shuddered beneath him, the engines steaming to life as the solar mirror-dishes mounted around the squat column of the mining ship's body unfurled to focus Sol's distant heat on the engine. The drill probe whined softly as it retracted and a moment later, the miner lifted lightly from the C-type's surface. Abrim donned his mask, watched dust drift gently into orbit from the surface of the tiny planetoid. Above them, the golden bulge of the ice-filled storage balloon blocked his view of the spider as they lifted toward it on a tail of steam.

Steam trainers, they were called, the scatter of solo men and women who mined this belt of wealth out here in the reaches between Mars and Jupiter, harvesting precious water and even more precious metals for the cities unfolding slowly in Earth's orbit and on the moon. Steam was what powered them, plentiful out here among the ice-filled rocks that made up the asteroid belt. Miriam brought the little ship around, easing alongside the spider-armed shape of the storage unit with its black wings of solar panels and its furled mirrors. Abrim watched moodily as her transfer arm snaked out to seize the golden balloon of ice with its deft tentacles. Abrim felt the shiver as the balloon undocked from the miner. A few moments later, Miriam locked it into its dock on the spider. Two empty docks left, Abrim thought bitterly. They could have worked through another shift and started the long drop down to Earth orbit, in plenty of time to earn the bonus for providing the needed ice. But it wouldn't pay—even at bonus rates—to drop with half a load, and Shimon's ship used two balloons worth of ice. "You might as well start the melting cycle," he told Miriam as the miner docked into its airlock housing. "We'll blow three and four for my brother."

Miriam grunted, the single sound conveying a wealth of displeasure.

"I was barely seven when we were brought to the refugee camp." Abrim slipped out of the webbing and stretched, wincing at the tension ache in his shoulders. "Shimon was fourteen. I never would have survived without him."

You probably would have, you know.

Abrim shook his head, because she didn't know, couldn't know about those bleak dusty years when death was a daily normality that bothered nobody much, except the occasional sunburned and overwhelmed Red Cross or Red Crescent volunteer. He stretched again, selected a bulb of tea from the dispenser. The comm light was shimmering. He tucked the tea into a holder on the console and pulled on his mask.

"Thanks for answering." Shimon looked almost haggard in the soft light of his upscale ship. "I don't know why I said that. By God, Abrim, I don't think . . ."

"Forget it." Abrim chopped off his apology with a brusque gesture that

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threatened to torque him into a spin. "Shimon?" He caught himself against the console. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Why should anything be wrong?" Shimon looked away. "Except that I've been hauling my tail around this vacuum desert for twenty-five years now, and what do I have to show for it? I can't even pay for my ship, and the only way I got her was to borrow from . . ." He broke off, gave Abrim a sideways look. "From people you aren't late paying."

Abrim felt a chill. "You borrowed from the Cartel." He said it flatly, didn't bother to make it a question.

"You know how I live." Shimon's eyes shifted away from his. "I don't save credit like you do. If I've got it, I spend it, and I have more fun than you do. Sorry." His mouth tightened. "Maybe I don't. How the hell should I know, little brother?"

"Do you need some credit, too?" Abrim asked softly. "I've been saving since I paid you off. It's yours, if you're really in a tight spot."

"I take enough from you and I don't pay for it." Shimon looked at him, his eyes shadowed with an emotion Abrim couldn't identify. "Don't you ever learn, little brother?" he asked softly.

A chill walked down Abrim's spine. "I learned. A long time ago."

Shimon shook his head. "I need two tanks of ice," he said flatly. "I'm not going to pretend that I'm going to pay you for them. I probably won't. But if you let me have them, then maybe I can save my ass."

"You don't have to ask that way," Abrim said gently.

"You're too good, you know?" Shimon looked at him squarely, and there was the faintest glimmer of contempt in his eyes. "Too good to be real. I almost left you behind, you know. In the camp. You were a big liability."

"When Ari offered you that job with the smuggling operation he was running."

"You knew?"

"I thought you went with him." Abrim shrugged. "But in the morning, there you were."

"I did go. I got off the truck and walked back. Stupid." Shimon stared off into a distance Abrim couldn't see. "Thanks, little brother," he said at last, his voice harsh. "If this M-type is the gold mine I think it is, I'll buy you dinner on Darkside."

"It's a deal." Abrim forced a smile.

Ready to transfer fuel, Miriam said crisply. *Transferring.*

"Thanks, brother. I owe you again." Shimon made a movement with his hand and Abrim waited for the screen to go dark. But it didn't. Instead, his brother leaned forward. "Do you ever wonder why?" he asked.

"Why what?" But the image of his brother had vanished. Troubled, Abrim scowled at the console in front of him, tempted to hail his brother's ship and ask him.

Transfer complete, Miriam stated.

The big, silvery triple-cylinder of Shimon's miner-refiner drifted away from the spider as lightly as dust rising from a C-type's surface. Abrim stripped off his mask, drained his tea, and dropped the bulb into the recycle chute. "Let's get back to work. If we're lucky, and that pocket is really as big as you say, we'll make that bonus."

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* * *

They worked another shift all the way through. The water was there and it wasn't luck. When Miriam assayed an ice pocket, she was accurate. That's why he'd bought the ship shell in the first place, five years ago. The former owner had updated it to state of the art technology, and new-grown Miriam had settled into the shell happily. It had been a hard eight years, hauling water for the Platforms and Darkside, paying off the loan. The military installations paid better, but he couldn't get the security clearance, not with his history.

In the final hours of the shift, he and Miriam hauled the last full balloon of ice up to the ship. His entire body ached with fatigue. They had been drilling, melting, and lifting for nearly twenty-four hours straight. A hollow nausea reminded him that he hadn't had anything but tea for much of that period, either. "Food," he said to Miriam. "Then we drop. You drive and I'll sleep."

Sounds good to me, she sang, as pleased as he was tired. *My injector jets need an acid clean. And I want a break, a VR week on the New Riviera.*

They docked the final balloon. He pulled his mask off and pushed wearily away from the console, meaning to web into his hammock and fall immediately asleep, as soon as Miriam started the drop. She'd wake him if she needed him. But then he rebounded back across the cabin to the console once more, pulled on his mask and called up his brother's link, not sure why he was doing this. "Shimon?" he said as the link established. "Just wanted to let you know I'm dropping. And I'm due for a big bonus this trip. So the ice you took is a gift from me. Just so you know. And my offer of credit still stands—if you don't find the golden egg in that lump of rock."

No answer. Abrim paused as he started to strip off his mask. The link was fully established. Which meant that his brother was masked, and had accepted the link-up. Or had the ship accepted it for him? Why no answer? "Shimon?" He found himself raising his voice. "Shimon, what's up? Are you there?"

Silence.

He's receiving.

"I know he's receiving!" Abrim took a slow breath, because why should anything be wrong? "Is he all right? Ask his ship."

Heart rate elevated, but not in the danger zone. Breathing 80 per minute. Corticosteroid levels elevated.

She had linked to Shimon's ship then, read the data coming in from his bio-interface. He was alive. Excited or working hard. But not dead. "Keep bugging him to answer," Abrim said, pissed. So like Shimon to just ignore him, let him sweat. "I'm going to shower." He stripped out of his singlet, put on the breathing mask and stepped into the coffin-sized closet, luxuriating in the gently pressurized spray that kneaded his body from all directions, draining tensions from his muscles with steaming heat. He drifted, half asleep, as the shower cycled, sucking the last droplets of water into the filters for recycling, drying him with blasts of warm air that made him think of the camp and the winds that swayed the new-date palms and the oil trees.

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He was lying on the dun sunbaked soil on a water bed, shaded by the palm fronds overhead, watching her walk toward him. She had dark hair with a hint of red, and he could see the shadow of her ribs beneath her small breasts. She was naked, and for an instant he worried that someone might see, but there was nobody else. Nobody but them. She stood over him for a moment, her thick hair shadowing her face so that he couldn't see her features, and then, in one fluid motion, she lay down beside him, her hair on his face, lips against his chest, her taut belly pressed against him as she slid one leg across him, waterbed waves lifting them gently. . . .

Ready to drop, bro. Miriam's voice startled him so that he arched his back, banging the back of his head against the shower stall with the sudden motion.

"Ouch!" He rubbed the tender spot, yawned, stifling a pang of longing. "I guess we should drop." He pushed the door open. "Oh yeah." He caught the door, pulled himself to a halt. "Did Shimon answer?"

No. Miriam sounded . . . uncomfortable. A few moments of silence passed. *Your brother's brainwave patterns are . . . abnormal,* she said reluctantly.

"What?" Abrim shoved off, naked, for the console. "What do you mean, abnormal?"

His ship let me have full access. They are similar to those of experimental subjects in a state of enhanced activity—hallucination, psychosis. I cross referenced them with the medical database on his ship. It's much more comprehensive than mine.

"Fine. We'll upgrade." Abrim snagged the console webbing to halt himself, scooping the mask onto his face. "Shimon! Hey, wake up or I'm gonna come charging in like the cavalry and you'd *better* be in trouble." Anxiety made his words too bright, too sharp, and he caught his breath at his own forecast. *You'd better be in trouble.*

"Where is he?" Stupid question. All ships were stealth-shielded to protect finds, which meant Shimon had been working hard to crack security if he'd "overheard" Cho. "Miriam, sneaky darling, is there any chance that you planted an eavesdropper on my brother's ship?"

I would never do something that illegal, she said primly, and his heart sank. *According to super-orbital law, you have the right to declare a legal lien on your brother's ship for the value of transferred ice, plus interest, which at this date and hour is the amount of six thousand eight hundred and forty shares of International Credit. This entitles you to keep track of your property, which is not eavesdropping at all but is . . .*

"Bless you! And it's still working?"

Yes, of course. Smugly. *He's about a twenty minute steam from here. I showed you, remember?*

That's right. Cho's abandoned ship. A chill filled him. Not pirates, Shimon had said. "Let's go," he said, but before the words were even out of his mouth, he felt the shiver as the solar mirrors unfurled like silver wings, directing Sol's distant light to the engine core. A moment later the engine quivered to life with the first explosion of water into steam. Slowly, the miner peeled away from the spider, sliding along on its comet-tail of water vapor.

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The M-type was a good-sized rock, lumpy and oblong like a misshapen egg. Spangled with lights, Shimon's bulky silver-blue ship, with its twin refinery and storage cylinders mounted on either side, floated near the M-type. "Shimon?" Masked and gloved, Abrim tried his brother once more. Not really believing he'd answer, but hoping. Silence, still. Miriam parked herself alongside the larger ship, matching main lock to main lock. "Will it let me in?" Abrim asked her.

Yes, Miriam told him. *Shimon authorized you access.*

Heart beating too fast, Abrim suited up and stepped into the personnel lock. As it cycled, he felt the familiar surge of awe and terror that always gripped him when he faced the stars without a probe or ship around him. Too big. Too vast. The lock irised open and an instant of vertigo seized him, passing swiftly, but leaving his skin briefly clammy. Stars wheeled past, distant galaxies, wisps of gas immensely huge beyond the lighted mountainslope of Shimon's ship. *Up* and *down* swung and settled and then he was all business, launching the tether to suction onto the skin of Shimon's ship near the lock, clipping the safety line to his suit. Kicking off gently, he spun down the silver track of the tether, catching himself deftly beside the lock, killing his momentum with bending wrists and elbows. The smart-alloy of Shimon's lock seemed to melt open into a space just large enough for him to pass. He pulled himself inside, unclipping, and pushed away from the opening as the wall melted into solidity again and the lock cycled.

Inside, the flowing silver curves dazzled him. There were no angles, no straight lines, every surface flowed into every other, as if he stood inside a drop of water. Utter silence raised the hairs on his neck. There was no whisper of fan or hum of electronics to tell him that the ship lived. The space was larger than his, seeming even larger without webbing or couch. A hull mounted gym with its straps dangling made him envious. No need to spend money in the gravity gyms on Darkside. "Shimon?" he said aloud, although his brother wasn't here.

He is at the drill site. The ship's voice was gentle and sexless and for some reason his neck hairs lifted again.

"Is he all right?"

Yes.

"Why won't he communicate?"

This time, the ship didn't answer.

"Ship?"

I cannot give you a factual answer for your question, the ship said in its gentle tone.

Suddenly, Abrim wanted nothing so much as to exit this gleaming sterile bubble and get back to his crowded, cluttered ship. But as he turned to leave, he spied a small bit of faded blue and brown, tethered to the flowing silver wall. He walked over to examine it.

A small, crude doll hung there, held by a thin thread of the silver alloy. It had a face of baked clay the color of the camp's dun soil, noseless now, with round gouged holes for eyes and a slash of a mouth. The body was made of wood, arms and legs of heavy electrical wire. The faded blue cloth that made the shirt and trousers had come from a shirt that had finally

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become more rag than clothing. Abrim touched the doll with a hesitant finger. He remembered the face of the aid worker who had made it for him. She had seemed so old then, but would have been young. Only the young and idealistic came to the camps to work in the hot sun and lose their naïvety. He tried to remember when the doll had dropped from his life and couldn't. He had no memory of losing it or leaving it behind.

Here it was.

Abrim left it there, waiting impatiently for the lock to cycle and the wall to melt open for him, barely noticing the wheeling galaxies as he propelled himself back along the tether. He pushed off too hard, came within a hair of breaking a wrist when he caught himself. "Miriam, where's his probe?"

I have him. Miriam opened the lock for him.

He kept his suit on, switched over to virtual so that he could watch them fall toward the bumpy surface of the M-type. It had an odd terrain—smooth and rounded, as if it had been partially melted and cooled, or polished in a gargantuan rock tumbler. He spotted his brother's probe—a huge blocky spider squatting on that alien landscape, its drilling tunnel thick enough for a man to crawl through. Ground ore was harder to move than liquid water. An ore bladder was partially expanded, but there was no sign of drilling, no plume of waste from the sorting vents. Fear began to gather in his belly as Miriam set them down next to the silent probe.

The access hatch to the drill tunnel stood open. Abrim didn't bother to check the probe itself when he exited onto the surface of the M-type. *He's below,* Miriam murmured in his ear. *Not moving. The drill is in safety-shutdown.* Abrim pulled his tether from his suit and clipped it to an anchor on the probe's wide belly. This rock was bigger than their C-type, but the gravity was barely enough to give him *down*. If he jumped hard enough into the air, he'd achieve escape velocity. Pulling a few meters of line free, he got to his knees and crawled into the darkness of the drill tunnel. Ahead of him somewhere, a thousand rasping ultra-diamond teeth, patterned on the radulae of a snail, had been chewing through the metal core of the rock, sucking the debris into the sorter and then into the storage bay for refining on the main ship. The thought of what would happen if the drill started up made his bowels clench, but Miriam was in contact with Shimon's ship and wouldn't let that happen. "Light," he murmured and tiny light packs flooded the rigid wall of the tube with full spectrum light.

In the distance, the tunnel curved eighty degrees left. As Abrim neared the bend he began to hear . . . music. He paused on hands and knees, skin crawling. No. It wasn't music . . . but it was more than sound. Like a melody you could almost identify. But not quite. If he listened . . . "Miriam?" he murmured. "What am I hearing?"

What do you mean? Miriam sounded puzzled. *I don't hear anything.*

That scared him. Abrim bolted forward, scrabbling like some cumbersome beetle, pushing himself along with feet and elbows braced against the slick wall. There, in front of him, Shimon crouched, arms around his raised knees, almost in a fetal position. The not-music seemed to be get-

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ting louder, and goosebumps prickled Abrim's arms. "Shimon!" he said, using local-chat. Shimon gave no sign that he'd heard him. Abrim grabbed his ankle. Almost no response, but he could feel tension in his brother's leg as he tried to pull it free of Abrim's grasp. Conscious, then. "Shimon, let's get out of here. Something's wrong!" No reponse. He pulled, trying to drag his brother backward, felt resistance. Shimon wasn't fighting, just resisting the pull with shoulders and feet braced against the tunnel wall. Abrim unclipped the tether from his suit, pulled a meter of slack into the line, and braced himself against the walls of the proboscis. With all his strength, he yanked his brother's legs away from the wall, wrapping the tie-line quickly about Shimon's ankles, binding them together. "Retract," he yelled, and the tether began to shorten itself, dragging the prone Shimon backward through the tunnel.

Shimon began to fight violently, clawing and flailing, bending double to grab for the line binding his ankles. "Sedate him," Abrim yelled, scrambling backward as Shimon slid toward him, fending off his brother's gloves from the binding. Shimon clawed at his suit, trying to tear it. "Miriam, have the ship sedate him! Hurry!"

There was no answer from Miriam, but suddenly Shimon went limp, clawlike hands relaxing, arms dragging as his body slid along the tunnel. Abrim said a prayer that the ship had sent a dose of sedative through the bio-interface in his suit. Sweating, he guided his brother's limp form back to the access hatch, still aware of the not-music fading in his head. It tugged at him, and he thought, like leaving home forever. Not applicable. He had never had a home to leave, not that he remembered. Shimon remembered. The odd thought chilled him like the shimmer of a leak, fountaining ice into vacuum. Shimon's eyes fluttered and his fingers twitched as Abrim maneuvered his awkward bulk across the intervening space and through the lock into Shimon's probe.

Inside, cocooned by the warmth and light and silvery curves of the cramped space, Abrim pulled back the hood of his brother's suit. He was breathing slowly, his eyes open with a glazed look. Sedated, but he recognized Abrim. "It's so beautiful," he mumbled, his fingers fluttering against Abrim's wrist. "I understand now. I understand." Light glowed in his eyes, a look of peace that Abrim had never seen there. "It's so beautiful." Tears welled in his eyes, spilled down over his pale cheeks. "Let me go. . . ."

The floor lifted beneath Shimon, forming a couch, raising him gently. A bioline snaked upward from the floor and slipped inside the neck of Shimon's opened suit. A med screen opened on the console, icons and numbers forming and dissolving, indicating healthy blood pressure, temperature, heart rate. Abrim was pushed back and away from his brother by the inhuman intervention of the ship.

His brainwave pattern is still abnormal, Miriam murmured in his ear.

"Shimon!" Fear tightened his vocal cords, tightened him. Abrim pushed back against the ship's intervention, felt the silvery material that cradled his brother harden and resist. He leaned over the curves of it, palms sliding across his brother's face, a tiny shock shivering through him as he felt the hard ridges of bone beneath skin, *looking* at him, really looking at him in the flesh for the first time in a long time.

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Too tall. Too skinny. Abrim slid his hands across his brother's shoulders, feeling the knob of joint beneath the supple fabric of his suit, feeling birdbones and no flesh, no muscle mass. In virtual, hours ago, he had been young and solid, just as Abrim remembered him, his shoulders rounded with muscle. Now, his shoulder blades jutted beneath fragile skin. "What have you been doing?" Abrim whispered, fear and grief seizing up his insides. Shimon had been to Darkside, must have used the G-gym on his gleaming expensive ship. . . . The elongated bones and the wasted muscle groups denied it. This was the body of someone who had lived for years in null G, years without standing erect in Earth-normal gravity.

Abrim thought back, to all the virtual encounters they'd had, how they had always just missed at Darkside. True, nobody he'd talked to there had run into his brother recently, but all the miners came and went in shifting flocks and the turnover in bar and hotel and retail personnel was frequent.

He had last seen Shimon on the day he had walked into the Displaced Persons Facility outside Cairo with the offer of a loan and a ticket for the Shuttle to Darkside. . . .

Abrim became aware that they had lifted, that Shimon's ship was docking the probe against its silvery flank. Probe and ship skins fused and a doorway seemed to melt away, forming a perfect connection between the two. Abrim pulled himself close to the couch. Leaning against the ship's resistance, he lifted his brother from the couch. Cradling Shimon against him, he propelled himself into the main cabin of the ship. Even in Earth's heavy gravity, his brother would have weighed nothing. In the silvery womb of the ship, the floor lifted in front of him, stretching upward like a bubble of silver water to insinuate itself between his chest and his brother's body, taking Shimon's limp body from him. The bio-lines snaked upward and the icons flickered on the main console. "Miriam, can you ask it to project a brain scan?"

A three-dimensional globe of light appeared above the console and colored shadows began to writhe and twist within it. "Do you understand it?" he asked aloud. Silence from Miriam. She would be analyzing it. He looked around, adrenaline draining from his system, leaving a vacuum of exhaustion in its wake. "Miriam, tell the ship to keep him sedated." He stumbled over the words. "Until we know what's wrong with him." His knees suddenly wanted to buckle. "I'm going to stay here, Miriam." He sat, and the floor rose up to accept him, cradle him. He needed to eat, but he wasn't hungry. Later, he thought and sat up straight, not meaning to sleep, forcing the alloy to conform to his rigid posture. "Shimon," he said out loud. "What the hell is going on with you?"

He sat there, upright, remembering, and, at some point, memory passed into dreams of the dun soil of the camp and his brother's long legs as he raced the older boys to the water truck, his bottle and Abrim's both in his hands. Someone was playing music in the distance and Abrim slowed, although he was thirsty. He knew the melody, had heard it before. . . .

He woke with a start, found himself straining, as if to hear a distant sound. For a moment, he blinked as silvery light replaced dun soil, struggling to remember where he was.

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Shimon's ship.

His brother drifted in the middle of the silver space, sealing his suit.

"Shimon!" Abrim tensed to leap from the chair that had subtly transformed to a couch while he slept. With a shimmer, the couch beneath him sprouted thick appendages that arched up and over his body, closing firmly across his chest and thighs. Four of them, scored with strangely familiar folds, held him down. A fifth curved along beside his shoulder, pressing his head down against the couch.

"Shimon, what are you doing?" he yelled. "Let me go."

His brother looked at him with wide eyes, empty of recognition, that seemed to reflect the cold silvery light of the ship. Without a word, he pushed off and soared precisely through the opening into the joined probe.

"Shimon!" Abrim struggled fiercely against the ship-stuff. "Don't go back there!"

The wall melted closed behind him.

Panting, Abrim let his muscles go slack, black spots crowding the edge of his vision. "Shimon," he whispered, tears burning at the back of his eyes. "Let me go." He recognized the thing that held him down now. It was a giant replica of Shimon's hand, exact to the boyhood scar that curved across the first two fingers below the knuckles. "Miriam?" He listened, heard nothing but the whisper of distant music. "Miriam, help me. Tell it to let me go."

No response, nothing. The ship must be blocking his communication with Miriam. He closed his eyes, thinking hard. The ship *was* Shimon, he told himself. The longer you lived with the schiz-cores, the more of your behavior they recorded, the more they acted like you. They weren't organic cores with a less predictable response. They were mirrors. Abrim took a deep breath. "Shimon," he breathed. "Don't leave me behind again. I just want to come with you." And the music swelled in his head and it was suddenly, achingly true.

The giant fingers holding him began to relax. The ship-stuff shimmered and softened, melting back into the floor. Abrim pushed off hard, tearing himself free of the dissolving grip, rocketing toward the far curve of the wall. It softened beneath his hands, absorbing his momentum, and he pulled himself over to the console. "Miriam," he gasped, saying a prayer that she could now hear him. "Get it to open the lock." She had to hear him. He sealed his suit, entered the lock. For a moment, he thought the ship wouldn't let him go after all, but then the lock cycled, and the wall melted away before him. Clipping on to his tether, he flew across the space between the ships, bullseyeing the lock so that he hit the end of his safety line inside the lock and nearly bounced back out of the ship again. Grabbing the edge of the door, he wrenched himself to a halt that strained every fiber in his arms as he killed his momentum.

You ever been in null G before, sailor? The lock had already closed and he felt the faint tremor in the probe that meant steam was jetting from the engine. He hooked himself through the lock and dove for his webbing, pulling it around him. "Miriam, set me down beside Shimon's dig. Fast.

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Visuals," he snapped and a million distant suns swarmed instantly across the darkening curve of the wall in front of him. There was the M-type. He could make out his brother's probe as a fleck of gleaming light on the dark rock. Abrim frowned. "Miriam! What the hell is wrong?" They weren't dropping, the M-type was diminishing slowly.

There is no diagnostic match for his neural activity patterns in the archives.

"What has that got to do with anything?"

Abrim, his brain isn't human . . . at least it's not functioning in a way that is identifiable as human.

The ship was cold. Or maybe the chill that seeped into his heart came from within. "Set me down next to his probe." Abrim enunciated each word coldly and clearly. "Right now. That is an order."

An organic core couldn't refuse a direct command. Unbreakable obedience was hardwired into their personalities.

The display on the wall did not change. *You can't do this,* Miriam said. *I don't understand what is happening here and neither do you.*

"You're right," Abrim said. He pressed his bare palm against the glossy plate on the console. "Local control," he said flatly. The emergency procedure locked out Miriam's control. She had tried to stop him. He felt numb. She couldn't do that. He concentrated on the ship, watching the M-type growing larger now. Shimon's probe winked like a silver gem on the dull surface.

Did you understand what I told you about his brain function changes? What happened to Cho? Abrim, will you listen?

"No." The landing was harder than usual, a jolt that shivered through the ship. He wasn't as good a pilot as Miriam. Abrim sealed his suit and cycled the lock, waiting for the rush of escaping atmosphere before easing himself onto the surface. He snapped his tether into the hull ring.

Shimon's probe was where it had stood before. Abrim made his way over to it, aware of the subtle sense of *down* from the weak gravity, and . . . sound.

It whispered in his ear, the subtle melody, a song that made him ache, a song he'd recognize in a moment. He realized suddenly that he had been hearing it for awhile, tried to remember when it had begun. Back on Shimon's ship? Maybe before that. Abrim caught the support leg of Shimon's probe, feeling as if he was in a dream, reliving his earlier trip here. Once more he pulled himself into the probe's drill tunnel. Shimon was ahead of him, like always, going first, making the way, taking the risks. He saw light from up ahead, realized with a vague jolt of surprise that he hadn't bothered to activate the tunnel light-packs, as if he no longer needed to see to find his way. The light was strange, not the full-spec glow of the LCDs, but something pearlescent and almost solid, like a glowing fog. The music increased in volume and it was at the edge of his mind . . . what it was. In a moment . . . he would know.

A blow from behind propelled him forward, and his shoulder struck the rigid drill-tunnel wall with numbing force. Pain spiked through his neck and side and he cried out wordlessly as something wrapped around his legs, pinioning them. A dark snake-like shape flashed in front of him,

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coiling across his chest, pinning his good arm to his side. Pain throbbed in his injured shoulder, silencing the music for the moment, clearing his head.

The drill proboscis. Miriam had sent it down the drill tunnel after him, and it had wrapped its slender flexible length around him like an Earthside snake. "Miriam!" He struggled against its constriction. "Let go! Now!"

No. I won't. Her words sounded sad. How could a ship sound sad?

"Miriam!" He struggled, but the proboscis maintained its tension, began to inch him slowly backward. Somehow she had evaded his block and had assumed control of the ship again. Which wasn't possible. Panting, Abrim tried to brace himself against the smooth tunnel wall, but the low-friction coating defeated him and he began to slide slowly backward. "Let go, damn it! Now! *Now!*"

Ahead, the pearlescent fog thickened, shimmering, coalescing then thinning as if trying to assume a form. The music was rising in his head and he stopped fighting, because in just a moment, he'd understand. He stood on the brink of that understanding and it was . . . beautiful.

The proboscis yanked him backward with a sharp jerk that slammed his injured shoulder against the rigid wall of the drill tunnel. The pain exploded in his head like a thunderclap and over its soundless noise he heard that beautiful distant music rising to a triumphant crescendo. "Shimon!" he cried, and blacked out.

He came to in darkness, a moment or a year later. His shoulder throbbed with the beat of his heart. "Light." He licked his dry lips as the LCDs warmed the tunnel. The proboscis had withdrawn and the tunnel was empty. His head ached and for a moment, he wondered if he had dreamed the whole thing. He crawled slowly, painfully forward, trying to favor his injured shoulder. He tried to hope as he reached the curve in the tunnel, but it was a pretense only.

The tunnel ended at the super-diamond teeth, the rasps whose design had been derived from the tongues of Earthside snails. Through the apertures between the tiny gleaming teeth, he could see raw rock and fine particles of ground stone grated beneath him as he struggled forward.

The slack silvery folds of an empty suit lay crumpled on the floor of the tunnel. For a moment he had an eerie image of his brother stripping off the suit, tossing it aside because he didn't need it any longer. Crazy. Abrim reached for the slippery material, pulling it closer. It was sealed.

He shivered and then couldn't stop.

In his head, silence, echoing and vast beyond the throb of his headache.

Abrim? Do you need help?

Miriam's voice made him jump. For a moment, it had seemed as if the entire universe was empty, that there was only himself, here in the heart of this now-dead rock. "No," he said, but as he tried to back down the narrow tunnel, he bumped his shoulder and the stab of pain filled his vision with dancing black spots. "Yes," he whispered. "Miriam, just get me out of here."

A moment later, the proboscis snaked up the tunnel, and wrapped—gently this time—around his legs, hips, and waist. *The bio-interface says you have an injured shoulder,* Miriam murmured in his ear. *I can't bring a*

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medical shell down the tunnel. I'm going to have to pull you out. Do you want me to sedate you before I move you?

"No." He clenched his teeth and held his injured arm across his chest with his good hand. "Go ahead. It's okay."

But it wasn't. Blackness swarmed across his vision the first time his shoulder bumped against the wall. He fainted. Or Miriam went ahead anyway and sent a dose of heavy sedative into his bloodstream though the interface.

He woke back on board the ship, cocooned in the medical cradle, floating weightless, his thoughts blurred with drugs, a muzak vision of Earthly meadows undulating in his masked vision. *The auto-doc said your shoulder was broken,* Miriam murmured. *The accelerated healing is far enough along that you can use it now.* The iridescent blue folds of the cocoon opened then twisted into a tight coil and withdrew into the wall of the ship.

He pulled off the mask, blinked in the dim ship light. His left arm was stiff, but he could move it and it didn't hurt . . . much. "How long was I out?" Abrim's throat felt raw, dried out. He swallowed, reached for the bulb of water that popped from the dispenser. "Mind reader," he said and shivered. "What happened to him, Miriam?" He closed his eyes, feeling the texture of that slack and lifeless suit in his hands again. "Do you know?"

No.

"Make a guess," he said harshly.

When I scanned to locate you in the tunnel, I picked up only one biological signature. I'm sorry, Abrim. That's all I can tell you.

Only one biological signature.

Again, he thought he heard a note of sadness in her voice. Shook his head. She shouldn't have been able to send the proboscis after him, shouldn't have been able to override a direct order. And if she hadn't? He listened to the emptiness inside his head where the music had once played. Shivered. "Shimon, what did you do?" he whispered.

The schiz-core had held him down to let Shimon escape back to the drill and . . . the music that wasn't music. *I understand,* his brother had cried, and his eyes had been full of . . . light.

State of the art schiz-core, created from continual observation of the customer, layering information about every reaction, growing and evolving forever, a ship-self that would react the same way you would in any crisis, without your direction.

Even to assisting in your suicide?

Abrim closed his eyes, seeing again his brother's skeletal frame, the elongated bones and wasted muscle mass. What were you striving for, he cried silently. Always the first, the best, the one to go furthest out?

What were you running from?.

His ship is gone, Miriam broke into his thoughts. *It wouldn't speak to me. Abrim?* She was silent for a moment. *What is your guess?*

"An egg? A trap? A monster?" He laughed harshly. "We think in Earth metaphors," he said.

It had been a beautiful song that he had nearly understood. For an in-

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stant, a pang of envy pierced him. Because Shimon *had* understood. Not dead, Abrim thought. Other, somewhere else, something else, but not dead. The certainty of it frightened him. He drew a slow breath, feeling the absence of the music in his head, guessing that he would feel that dark lack forever. "Open a slow-link to Darkside," he said. "I'll compress a report and download it to them. I guess we know what happened to Cho and the others."

They'll want you to come down so they can ask questions. She sounded worried. Which was as unlikely as a ship sounding sad. Abrim shook his head, aching from the enhanced healing, aching from the grief he had yet to face. "We're full. We're heading down anyway. They're going to have a fit when I tell them about Shimon's core. I always said a cloned-core was more reliable."

I am, she said in a subdued voice.

"Just when did you find a way around the emergency lock-out?"

She didn't answer him. Abrim sighed. For a moment, a vision of his brother's luminous eyes filled his head. He willed it away. Was it better to listen to the siren's song and leap overboard, or to remain tied to the mast and remember it forever? "Open the link," he said. "Then let's pick up the spider and drop." ○

SCIENCE FICTION MOON

It's a science fiction moon rising
harvest full tonight above those distant,
silhouetted Sierras, wedging itself between
the luminous skyscrapers of the city and their
pulsing red aircraft warning lights, adding little
if anything new to the book cover illusions of the
future we've already come to expect from sci-fi
writers, though still full with distant possibility,
a singular landscape patiently awaiting fresh
footfalls and eyes wide open with wonder.

—G.O. Clark

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THE GARCIA NARROWS BRIDGE

Allen M. Steele

The latest story in Allen M. Steele's "Coyote Rising" series is also a homage to one of his favorite movies (hint: it starred William Holden and Sir Alec Guinness). This tale and others will be out in book form from Ace in December of this year.

The day is Anael, Adnachiel 66, C.Y. 5: a perfect morning in early autumn. The place is the Eastern Divide, the great row of limestone bluffs running along the eastern coast of New Florida, separating its flat marshlands from the East Channel. On the other side of the channel is Midland, the equatorial continent that straddles Coyote's northern meridian; like most of the planet, it's largely unexplored, yet this is about to change, for where there was once only an expanse of water, there's now an alien object, something never before seen on this world.

A bridge.

Almost two miles long, with a mid-length clearance of a hundred and ten feet, the bridge is built almost entirely of native wood and stone; indeed, the only metal used in its construction are the thick steel bolts that hold together the post-and-beam structure of the six blackwood arches holding up the concrete roadway. The arches and the towers that support them rest upon massive limestone piers, and suspended between each arch is a hinged span that seems to float in midair above the channel. The bridge appears fragile, but appearances are deceiving: designed to withstand the harshest winter storm or the highest spring flood, it can hold the weight of pedestrians, carts, rovers . . . even an army.

At this moment, though, the bridge is vacant. For the first time since last Machidiel, when construction began, no one stands upon it. The scaffolds have been dismantled, along with the temporary caissons that once surrounded the piers at the base of the towers; the bamboo basket that

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transported workmen along an extended cable strung between the towers is still in place, but soon it'll be taken down. The bridge is finished. The only thing left to be done is the dedication ceremony.

Almost eight hundred people have gathered beneath the river bluffs. During the course of the last year, a small town has grown up within the shadows of the Eastern Divide: dormitories, commissaries, warehouses, and sheds, sprawling across acres of savannah near the limestone quarries where workers chipped out the blocks used to build the towers. Today, though, Bridgeton is empty; everyone has hiked up the new road blasted through the Divide, where they now gaze across the Narrows at a slightly smaller group standing atop the Midland Rise: Forest Camp, whose workmen chopped down the blackwoods and milled them for the massive beams used for the arches and support towers.

Over fourteen hundred men and women have labored long and hard for nearly seven months, almost two years by Gregorian reckoning. They paid for the bridge not only with sweat and muscle, but also blood: seven people perished in construction accidents ranging from falling from the towers to drowning in the channel. But this day is not for mourning, but for celebration. Red and blue pennants dangle from the trusses, and garlands of wildflowers are woven around the handrails.

In the Bridgeton mess hall, the long tables have been laid out, and dozens of chickens and pigs have been butchered, in preparation for a mid-day fiesta, while casks of sourgrass ale carted in from Shuttlefield wait to be tapped. Outside the hall, a small stage has been set up—the Coyote Wood Ensemble will perform a symphony written especially for this occasion by Allegra DiSilvio—and a nearby field has been cleared for a softball game. The crowd shuffles restlessly, impatient to get through the dedication ceremonies so they can begin the long-awaited party.

Standing at the bridge entrance is a small group of dignitaries. The colonial governor, the Matriarch Luisa Hernandez, a stocky woman in a brocaded purple cape, her hood pulled back. The lieutenant governor, the Savant Manuel Castro, his black robe concealing his skull-like face and metallic form. Chris Levin, the chief proctor, one of the original colonists from the URSS *Alabama,* the first starship to reach the 47 Ursae Majoris system; his eyes constantly shift back and forth, as if searching for trouble. Leaders of the various guilds whose members were recruited for the construction effort; many of them are mildly inebriated, having already sampled the ale before coming up here.

And in their midst, a quiet figure, slight of build and stooped at the shoulders, his thin face framed by a beard peppered with grey. He wears a threadbare frock coat despite the warmth of the day, and his soft brown eyes peer owlishly from behind wire-rim glasses.

James Alonzo Garcia, architect and chief engineer of the Garcia Narrows Bridge. Not the sort of person one would expect to lead such a monumental task. Indeed, he sees himself not so much as an engineer but rather as a poet. Instead of words, though, physics are his form, mathematics his meter; for him, the bridge that bears his name is a poem of gravity and resistance, tension and compression, an elegant sonnet

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whose couplets are expressed in equations. Others may see the bridge as an edifice, but for him it is a song that only he can hear.

This is his masterpiece. And he hates it.

A red ribbon has been stretched across the entrance, tied together in a thick bow. James Garcia—formerly known, a lifetime ago back on Earth, as "Crazy Jimmy"—looks down, gently squeezes his left thumb. Digits appears on the fingernail: 1158:47:03. Almost noon. He's supposed to deliver a speech at this time; a few public words, expressing his thoughts upon this grand occasion. This sort of thing isn't in his character—he's shy, reticent when it comes to things like this—yet a mic dangles from his left ear, wired to a sound-system set up so that what he says can be heard by all. Everyone is waiting for him, but he holds off, delaying the ceremony.

Across the channel, just for a moment, he catches a flash of light. Once, twice, three times, from an rocky outcrop on the Midland Bluffs just below the east side of the bridge. As if to shade his eyes, Garcia briefly raises a hand. The light winks twice more, then is no longer seen.

He turns to the woman standing next to him, nods briefly. The matriarch smiles, then turns to Savant Castro. Ruby-colored eyes stare into his own, then a metallic claw comes from beneath the cloak, offering a pair of shears painted gold to resemble ceremonial scissors.

Garcia accepts the shears, steps forward to the ribbon. Seeing this, a cheer rises from the nearby onlookers, reciprocated a few moments later by those on the other side of the channel. Garcia lets the applause wash over him. For better or worse, this is his moment; none of this would have been possible were it not for him.

He raises the shears, his hands trembling as he opens the blades. So tempting just to cut the ribbon, get it over and done. But, no, there are things which must be said; this is an historic event, after all, and history must be served.

And so he speaks. . . .

In order to properly understand what James Alonzo Garcia said this day, and why he did what he did, one must go back. Not to the beginnings of the colonization of Coyote—that story has already been told elsewhere—but to the events after the disappearance of the original settlers and the arrival of the next wave of colonists from Earth. This explains why a bridge was constructed across the Eastern Channel, and why Crazy Jimmy was the man who built it.

When the *Alabama* party abandoned their original settlement and fled New Florida, following the unexpected arrival of the WHSS *Glorious Destiny,* they did so in longboats, kayaks, and sea-canoes they had fashioned from native materials. Using a route discovered by the Montero Expedition of C.Y. 02, they traveled down Sand Creek until they reached the Shapiro Pass, which allowed them access through the Eastern Divide to the East Channel. By the time a squad of Union Guard soldiers led by Luisa Hernandez set foot in Liberty, the settlers had already crossed the channel and vanished into the wilds of Midland, never to be seen again.

Once the Western Hemisphere Union assumed control of New Florida, the matriarch turned her attention to tracking down the *Alabama* party.

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Despite her efforts, though, their whereabouts remained a mystery; although every square mile of Coyote was surveyed from orbit, no signs of human habitation were found anywhere on the planet. No radio signals were detected by long-range sensors, and low-altitude sorties by gyros were likewise unsuccessful.

Suspecting that the colonists had established a new settlement somewhere on Midland, Savant Castro proposed sending a military expedition into the adjacent continent. However, the matriarch declined. Her primary objective had already been fulfilled, so there was no real reason to pursue them. Her major concern now was assuring the survival of the one thousand people aboard the *Glorious Destiny*; since Liberty was much too small to house all of them, a second town was established near the landing field. During their first long winter on Coyote, most of the immigrants were forced to live in tents, subsisting on meager rations brought from Earth; morale was low, and only a relative handful of Union Guard soldiers were available to keep them in line. So Hernandez was unwilling to spare any of her troops; the location of the vanished colonists would have to remain a mystery, at least for the time being.

As time went on, though, the matriarch came to realize that her troubles had only begun. Over the course of the next year and a half, by LeMarean reckoning, three more ships arrived—the *New Frontiers,* the *Long Journey,* and the *Magnificent Voyage*—each depositing a thousand more colonists on New Florida before turning around for the trip back to Earth. The majority were unsuited for frontier life; although most had won their berths through public lotteries, many had bribed their way aboard, nor was it a secret that some were political exiles or furloughed criminals. Shuttlefield swelled in size, soon becoming a shanty-town ruled by various guilds, groups, and gangs. The newcomers were put to work on collective farms, yet, after awhile, even the matriarch was forced to admit—albeit only to Manuel Castro, her closest aide—that social collectivism was inadequate for settling a new world.

Making the situation worse was the fact that New Florida was a savannah, a vast expanse of grasslands and swamp, with few forests to supply wood for building new houses. Within a year, nearly all of the closest stands of blackwood and faux-birch had been leveled; although Japanese bamboo had been successfully introduced, it wasn't suitable for dwellings able to withstand Coyote's long winters. Clearly, they had to look elsewhere for native resources.

And so the matriarch cast her gaze upon Midland. Not only was it closer and more accessible than Great Dakota to the west, but its lowlands were also covered by dense rainforests. Geological surveys along the Gillis Range indicated that the mountains held sizeable deposits of iron, titanium, copper, even silver and gold—metals scarce on New Florida. Midland was virgin territory, just waiting to be conquered.

All they needed was a way to get there.

The East Channel was the obstacle. From high orbit, it only looked like a river, until one realized that, at the Montero Delta where the channel flowed into the Great Equatorial River, it was nearly fifty miles wide. Furthermore, there were only four major passes through the Eastern Di-

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vide, none of which were easily navigable except during late winter and early spring, when the streams that had carved them through solid limestone were flooded by melting snow . . . and even then, it was only a one-way trip, because the currents were too swift.

A group of malcontents, fed up with life in Shuttlefield, had built a tiny settlement near the Monroe Pass, establishing a ferry able to carry people, including a religious cult whom the matriarch was only too glad to let go, over to Midland. However, Thompson's Ferry was inadequate for her purposes; she needed reliable access across the channel, access that was firmly under Union control, so she would be able to send timber and mining crews into Midland and bring back wood and ore. Yet boats were dependent upon weather and the seasons, aircraft limited by low payloads and inability to land in difficult terrain.

Clearly, she needed a bridge. And that's when she turned to James Alonzo Garcia.

In the year 2246, the sea-mining industry had grown to the extent that OceanSpace LLC determined that it was more cost-efficient to build a permanent colony on the continental shelf off the Atlantic coast of Florida. Until then, the only successful deep-ocean habs had been small installations capable of supporting no more than fifty people at a time; OceanSpace wanted a small city, located more than three hundred feet beneath the surface, able to support more than a thousand people in a shirt-sleeve environment. Not only that, but it would also have to sustain a one-atmosphere internal pressure of oxygen-nitrogen instead of oxygen-helium, and be totally self-sufficient. And it had to be comfortable; no bunks or crowded compartments, but rather individual living quarters, spacious pedestrian malls, even holotheaters and miniature golf courses.

Quite a few people thought this was impossible. Many predicted that the colony was a disaster waiting to happen, and they produced graphs, simulations, and pie-charts to make the point. Yet six years later, Aquarius opened its airlocks to submersibles bringing aboard its first residents. Despite dire forecasts, the buckydomes never collapsed under pressure, nor did its hydrothermal power systems or open-loop life-support systems ever fail.

The architect responsible for this miracle was James Alonzo Garcia. He was thirty-one years old when Aquarius was finished, yet he never visited his creation; he was prone to seasickness.

In 2253, the Mars colonies needed an efficient means of traversing the Valis Marineris. Until then, the only way to travel from one side of the vast canyon system to the other was by means of airship. Semi-rigid dirigibles could only carry a handful of people, though, and had limited cargo capacity. They were also vulnerable to Martian weather conditions. A solution had to be found.

On Ares Day 2258, the Alice B. Stanley Bridge across the Noctis Labyrinthis was officially dedicated. Over ten miles in length, with twin five hundred foot towers supporting a stayed-cable roadway above a chasm nearly a mile deep, the bridge was so enormous that it could be seen by the naked eye from low orbit. Again, there were predictions that

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it would be destroyed by the first major dust storm or marsquake, yet the Stanley Bridge survived everything that nature threw at it.

Its designer, the thirty-nine-year-old engineer James Alonzo Garcia, attended the opening ceremonies via holotransmission from his home in Athens, Georgia. He claimed that the flu prevented him from making the trip to Mars, yet everyone who worked on the project knew that he was terrified by the prospect of setting foot aboard anything that left the ground.

Crazy Jimmy didn't earn his nickname by accident. The stereotypical image of the civil engineer is one of a broad-shouldered, barrel-chested man with a blueprint in one hand and a protractor in the other. Garcia didn't fit the profile: ascetic and thin-faced, he looked more like Robert Browning than Robert Moses. Those who knew him personally—there weren't many, outside a small circle of associates—often described him in two terms: genius and mad. He graduated from the University of Georgia at age twenty-one with a doctorate in physics, and after that he seldom left home, and only then if he could travel by maglev train. He wore black at all times, and his favorite article of clothing was a frock coat he'd found in his grandfather's attic. He slept no more than four or five hours a night. He had no apparent interest in women; his only love affair was with a seventeen-year-old second cousin he met at a family reunion when he was twenty-three, and who shattered him by spurning his marriage proposal. He claimed to be an atheist; those closest to him knew that he believed in reincarnation, and that in a past life he had once been a dog.

Nevertheless, no one denied the fact that Garcia was brilliant, albeit otherworldly. He perceived complex engineering problems in poetic terms; for him, an equation was a couplet, an algorithm, a rhyme. Aquarius was a homage to Edgar Allan Poe's "The City Under the Sea" expressed in mathematical terms, the Stanley Bridge a contemplation upon the value of *pi* as a material object. In these things, and others—elaborate homes he designed for friends, skyscrapers that seemed to defy gravity, the occasional public monument as a diversion—he displayed his gifts.

Although he was a perfectionist by nature, he was far from perfect himself. Garcia had little patience for those who couldn't keep up with him;. he fired assistants for as little reason as showing up for work a couple of minutes late, and once walked off a project in which he had been involved for several years because the client failed to appreciate the awning he'd designed for the front entrance. Many of his colleagues perceived him as arrogant, yet few realized that his erratic behavior stemmed from a deep sense of insecurity. For all his talent, James Garcia was a lonely man, unable to communicate with the world in any meaningful way except through the things he built.

Even today, historians disagree about what compelled James Garcia to emigrate to Coyote. Certainly it wasn't to find adventure; for all intents and purposes, he was a recluse. Some speculate that after the Stanley Bridge, he was seeking another off-world challenge. If this is so, then why travel forty-six light-years, leaving behind everything he knew? Jonas NcNair, the architecture critic, believes that he may have lost favor with the Proletariat after he refused to design a new Government Center for

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the Western Hemisphere Union in Havana, an allegation supported by Garcia's well-documented dislike for social collectivism, a system that wouldn't allow him to earn as much as he did when he worked on projects in Europe and PanAfrica. Or perhaps, as some have theorized, like so many others who went to Coyote before him, Garcia simply reached a point in life when he wanted to make a fresh start.

The truth is very simple: he had no choice. The Proletariat realized that, sooner or later, Coyote would require the services of a master architect, someone able to tackle the most difficult engineering problems. Only one person fit that description, and so he was drafted. Had he been given advance warning, Garcia might have been able to flee from the Union; like so many other rich people in the WHU, he kept his private earnings in Swiss banks, and the Union was willing to look the other way so long as he paid his taxes and didn't flaunt his wealth in public. One of the tenets of collectivist theory was that individuals should be willing to make sacrifices for the greater good of society, so when the Proletariat decided that Coyote needed the talents of James Alonzo Garcia, he awoke one morning to find all his lines of credit frozen, his travel permits denied, his contacts no longer willing to answer the phone, and a patriarch and two proctors waiting in his office with an offer that he could not refuse.

And so, on Barachial 6, C.Y.5, James Alonzo Garcia walked down the ramp of a Union shuttle. Unlike the hundreds of other immigrants who'd also spent the last forty-eight years in biostasis aboard the *Magnificent Voyage,* though, Garcia never had to endure a cold night in Shuttlefield. The moment he set foot on Coyote, proctors ushered him to a waiting maxvee, which spirited him away to Liberty, where he was assigned to a three-room log cabin in the center of town. And that evening, while he was unpacking his bags, Garcia received his first visitors: Luisa Hernandez and Manuel Castro. They personally brought him dinner, and while a Union Guard soldier stood watch outside, the three of them had a meeting. It lasted only an hour, and, after they left, Garcia stood on the front porch of his new home, silently gazing up at Bear as it rose above the night sky.

Garcia was treated with far more dignity than the average immigrant. Since all the usual weight limits had been waived in his favor, his comps, books, and even his antique drafting board had been freighted from Earth. When it became apparent that he needed a warmer jacket than his frock coat, he was given a fur-lined parka (which he wore only on the coldest days). He didn't eat in the community hall, but instead took his meals in the privacy of his home. Whenever he needed anything—pads, fresh sheets and blankets for his bed, a coffee pot, a new pair of boots—it was available simply for the asking. Compared to the thousands living in squalor in Shuttlefield, James Garcia lived like a prince . . . and all he was expected to do in return was to lend his talents to the colony.

His circumstances weren't unbearable. He hadn't left anyone behind whom he couldn't live without, and while his quarters were relatively primitive, neither were they uncomfortable. So he went to work on the first task given to him by the matriarch, designing a master-plan for Shuttlefield that would ease the settlement's overpopulation problems. It

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only took six weeks for him to come up with a wheel-shaped layout for streets and neighborhoods, complete with a sewage system, a zoned business district, schools, and a public commons, with roads leading to Liberty, the nearby farms, and the landing field. It was something a first-year student could have done, yet when he showed it to the matriarch, she praised him as a genius.

And that's when she told him she needed a bridge.

From the outset, Garcia knew that building a bridge across the East Channel would be more difficult than it seemed. No two bridges are exactly alike, no matter how similar they may appear; each poses its own unique challenges. And while the Stanley Bridge was one of the largest ever built, Garcia quickly realized that this new one would tax the limits of his ingenuity.

Midway through Machadiel, the last month of winter, Garcia joined a four-man expedition down Sand Creek to survey the channel and the Eastern Divide. Never much of a traveler, the architect made the trip only with great reluctance; however, he knew that he had to see the channel with his own eyes, and not simply rely on reports made by others.

Another expedition member was Chris Levin, the chief proctor who, along with his mother, remained in Liberty after the *Alabama* party disappeared. Levin was the natural choice to lead the survey team; not only had he designed and built the single-mast pirogue, the *Lady of Huntsville,* which the team used for the trip, but he had also been on the ill-fated Montero Expedition that crossed the Eastern Divide three years before.

Sand Creek was still running high, so the pirogue made it through the Shapiro Pass without any difficulties. Once they reached the East Channel, the expedition turned north, spending the next several days exploring the seventy-mile stretch between the Shapiro Pass and Thompson's Ferry. It was a slow and arduous voyage; the current was against them, making the ride anything but smooth, and Garcia was frequently seasick, trying the patience of the other men aboard. After the first two days on the channel, Garcia elected not to remain aboard any longer. While Levin and his first mate, Union Guard lieutenant Bon Cortez, went ahead in the pirogue, Garcia and Frederic LaRoux, a geologist, hiked the rocky beach beneath the towering bluffs of the Eastern Divide, catching up with the *Lady of Huntsville* when it came ashore for the evening.

This turned out to be a wise decision, for it gave Garcia and LaRoux a chance to inspect the bluffs more closely. As Garcia suspected, much of the Eastern Divide was comprised of porous limestone, unsuitable for supporting a large structure. However, here and there the limestone had been eroded away, exposing impermeable shale beneath it. And midway between the Shapiro Pass and Thompson's Ferry, fortuitously located at the most narrow point of the Eastern Channel, rested a granite bluff suitable for their needs.

The Narrows, as Levin labeled the straits on his map, were a little less than two miles across; the Midland Rise could easily be seen from the beach. The expedition made camp on the western side, and spent the next

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several days surveying the site from both sides of the channel, using deep-core drills to extract rock samples and sonar to gauge the depth of the waters. At midpoint, the Narrows were nearly a hundred feet deep, yet at several places the floor rose to within forty feet of the surface, and soundings revealed the existence of solid bedrock several feet beneath the muddy river bottom. Garcia climbed to the top of the Eastern Divide and set up his theodolite, then spent a day examining the eastern side of the channel through its scope, repeating this the following day from the top of the Rise, while Bon Cortez stood two miles away with a meter-stick in hand.

Eight days after it set sail upon the East Channel, the *Lady of Huntsville* arrived at Thompson's Ferry, thirty-eight miles upstream from the Narrows. Levin, Cortez, and LaRoux took advantage of Clark Thompson's hospitality, luxuriating in hot baths and devouring everything Aunt Molly put before them; they spoke enthusiastically about what they'd found, and Thompson listened with interest as they told him about the plans to build a bridge across the Narrows. Yet Garcia had none of this. Locking himself inside a storeroom of the town lodge, he spread his maps, charts, and notebooks across a table and went straight to work, sleeping on the bare wooden floor and eating only when Molly Thompson insisted that he needed food.

Two days after the *Lady of Huntsville* showed up at the ferry, Clark Thompson and his nephew Garth went fishing. Cortez and LaRoux took little note of this, but Levin watched from the deck of the lodge while their kayak made its way toward Midland. It returned many hours later, just before sundown; apparently it had been a bad day for fishing, for neither of the men brought anything home. The chief proctor took note of the fact that their bait-box apparently remained untouched, but he carefully said nothing about it.

The following morning, Garcia emerged from the storeroom, haggard and red-eyed, with several scrolls beneath his arms and a hoarse-throated request to return to Liberty at once. His bridge existed, if only on paper and within his mind's eye.

All he needed to do now was build it.

James Garcia was under no delusions. Since there were no iron deposits on New Florida and the ones on Midland weren't ready to be mined, the bridge would have to be built almost entirely out of wood and stone. With no iron for cables, this ruled out any sort of suspension bridge. While the channel was relatively shallow, its current was swift; the support towers would therefore have to be erected while the waters were at their lowest mark, during late spring and summer. And because none of the heavy machinery available to him on Earth or Mars—tower-cranes, dredges, earthmovers—existed on Coyote, this meant that they would have to rely upon hand-built derricks, high explosives, portable generators, and sheer muscle. In short, a two-mile bridge would have to be built within a short period of time, using only native materials, under primitive conditions.

A Crazy Jimmy project, to be sure. And he couldn't have been happier; it was the sort of challenge he thrived upon.

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When Garcia showed his plans to Luisa Hernandez, the matriarch quickly gave her approval to the project. Indeed, he was surprised by her sanguine acceptance of the difficulties; it didn't seem to matter very much to her that the bridge would tax the colony's resourcees in terms of both material and human effort. *Whatever you need,* she said, *you'll get it.*

Such *carte blanche* should have been an engineer's dream, yet Garcia would soon learn otherwise. A few days later, the matriarch held a public meeting in Liberty. The community hall was filled to capacity, with hundreds of colonists standing outside. Flanked by her staff, with Chris Levin on one side and Manuel Castro on the other, Hernandez announced plans to build a bridge across the East Channel to Midland, with work beginning immediately. She then went on to state that this would be the colony's first priority for the coming year, and that, in the spirit of social collectivism, she expected every able-bodied person to contribute to the effort.

It soon became clear what the matriarch meant by this; she wasn't seeking volunteers so much as she was issuing a draft notice. Over the course of the next two weeks, proctors combed Shuttlefield, locating every man and woman above the age of eighteen and checking their employment status against their records. Everyone who wasn't already working on the farms or serving some other vital function was conscripted to the construction project. No exceptions, no deferrals. When someone tried to refuse, they were informed that their ration cards would be annulled, meaning that they wouldn't be allowed to eat in the community hall. When the Cutters Guild attempted to go on strike, the matriarch responded by having their leaders arrested and their camp torn down by the Union Guard, their belongings confiscated and impounded. Upon seeing what happened to the largest and most powerful group in Shuttlefield, the other guilds hastily fell into line.

Garcia was outraged, but when he told the matriarch that he needed skilled workmen, not slave laborers, she replied that this wasn't true; everyone would be paid, in credits good for purchasing goods at shops in Liberty (which, it went without saying, were co-oped by the colonial government, meaning that a large percentage of workers' payments would go straight back to the Union). She then pointed out that most of Shuttlefield was unemployed, with little to do except sit around and wait for a job to open up. The bridge would shake them out of their indolence, give them a purpose for their lives. This was the ideal of collectivist theory: the efforts of individuals applied to the greater good of society as a whole. Didn't he believe in social collectivism?

Garcia grumbled, and returned to his drafting board.

Since the Narrows lay sixty miles from Liberty, one of the first tasks was the establishment of a road to the Eastern Divide. Thirty men spent two weeks marching through the grasslands, burning all the swampgrass and spider bush in their way and building footbridges across the swamps. There were several stands of blackwood and faux-birch along the way, the last few remaining in this part of New Florida; they were cut down, the logs hauled on carts down what came to be known as Swamp Road to the construction site. A new settlement began to take form beneath the Eastern Divide—barracks, latrines, a mess hall, warehouses, craft shops—and

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it wasn't long before Shuttlefield began to empty out, as men and women were relocated to the coast. Every day, Bridgeton grew a little more, while Shuttlefield gradually shrank.

While this was going on, a new ferry was established on the channel. Chris Levin, temporarily relieved from his duties as chief proctor, was put in charge of building a fleet of construction barges. Another crew under Bon Cortez was given the task of setting up a logging camp and lumber mill on the other side of Midland Rise, with roads leading to the rainforests a few miles away. Forest Camp was smaller than Bridgeton, yet no less active; only the toughest men and women lived there, the ones who didn't mind getting splinters in their hands or the long nights spent huddled around smoky fires. Indeed, many preferred the hardship; at least they were away from Shuttlefield, and more or less free, as long as they ignored the armed soldiers loitering nearby.

Garcia remained in Liberty during this period. He worked out of his cabin, revising his blueprints, receiving daily reports via satphone from his foremen. Every few days, he'd climb warily aboard a gyro piloted by a guardsman and pay a visit to the construction site; he still disliked flying, but it was the only way he could reach the Narrows on short notice. Those who saw him then remember a small figure in a frock coat, his hands clasped behind his back, silently walking past stacks of cut timber as he listened to crew chiefs whose names he often forgot, occasionally stopping to jot down notes in his pad.

He rarely spoke, though, so no one knew what was on his mind.

Garcia wasn't the only one quietly observing what was going on. The activity at Forest Camp had drawn the attention of others who had a vested interest in the Narrows.

When Clark Thompson and his nephew went fishing that day in Machadiel, they weren't out to hook a few channelmouths. After they rowed across the channel, the elder Thompson left Garth behind with the boat while he hiked up a narrow path leading to the top of the Midland Rise. A young man whom he knew only as Rigil Kent was waiting for him, summoned two days earlier by a brief satphone call Clark had made when no one was watching. The two men had a short conversation, then Rigil Kent vanished into the woods.

Rigil Kent was the alias adopted by Carlos Montero, the *Alabama* colonist who, on and off over the course of the last two years, had waged guerilla war against the Union. Twice already he'd led small raiding parties across the channel; the first time to steal firearms from Liberty, the second to blow up a spacecraft in Shuttlefield. Although his efforts were still sporadic, Carlos's objective was to force the Union off New Florida; even if he couldn't get the newcomers to return to Earth, then at least he might be able to make them surrender Liberty, which he and his followers considered to be stolen property.

After his rendezvous with Clark Thompson, Carlos returned to Defiance, the settlement hidden within a river valley on the other side of Mt. Shaw that the matriarch had been unable to find. That evening, he made his report to the Town Council. Like everyone else, Robert Lee—once the com-

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manding officer of the *Alabama,* now the elected mayor of Defiance—was disturbed to learn that Luisa Hernandez intended to erect a bridge across the East Channel. Until now, Lee had supported the resistance efforts only reluctantly; he believed that, if his people lay low on Midland, the Union would leave them alone. Yet now it was clear that the matriarch wanted Midland as well as New Florida. Once the bridge was built, it was only a matter of time before Union troops invaded Midland.

Several council members favored destroying the bridge before it could be completed, but Lee had no desire to do anything that might kill or injure any civilians working on the project. Several newcomers had already made their way across the Gillis Range to Defiance; from them, he'd learned that the Union had misled immigrants as to how they'd be living on Coyote. If Rigil Kent attacked the bridge, then innocent lives would doubtless be lost, and Lee knew that this would only cause colonists who might otherwise be sympathetic to their cause to turn against them. There's a fine line between being a freedom fighter and being a terrorist, and Lee was reluctant to cross it.

However, Carlos had another idea. According to what Clark Thompson had told him, it appeared that the bridge's architect might not be marching in lockstep with the matriarch. If this was true, then they might be able to reach him somehow, perhaps convince him of the error of his ways. If they could do this, perhaps there might be a way to make the bridge work *for* them. . . .

The council listened to him, and Lee gave his approval. *See if you can contact Garcia,* Lee told Carlos. *Maybe we can work something out with him.*

And that's what Rigil Kent set forth to do.

By the middle of Ambriel, the second month of spring, the first phase was well under way. The spring floods had subsided by then, allowing for the construction of eight watertight caissons, made of thick blackwood logs harvested on Midland that had been hauled by barges from Forest Camp into the Narrows, where they were vertically sunk in a straight line across the channel, a quarter-mile apart from one another. Once the water was pumped out, masons descended into the shafts to build permanent caissons for the support towers; from the New Florida side, limestone blocks were excavated from quarries near Bridgeton and transported by barges to the caissons, where they were slowly lowered by hand-cranked derricks into the empty shafts. Once the permanent caissons were finished, they would be filled with concrete brought over from Bridgeton, forming the piers for the support towers.

In the meantime, lumberjacks at Forest Camp were busy stockpiling wooden beams for the trusses. Care was taken to insure that the beams were individually cut to precise specifications; once finished, they were covered with canvas tarps to prevent sun and rain from warping them. And while this was going on, a demolition crew was using plastic explosives to blast road-cuts through the Eastern Divide and the Midland Rise, providing easy access to the Narrows from either side of the channel.

By now, it had become impractical for James Garcia to remain in Lib-

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erty. Although he'd found a reliable chief foreman, Klon Newell, a civil engineer, there were too many details that he had to look after himself. So once a one-room cabin was built for him in Bridgeton, he packed up his belongings and moved there.

Garcia soon discovered that he no longer had the same degree of solitude he'd enjoyed in Liberty. Since there was no one to bring his meals to him, he had to eat in the mess hall, sitting alongside sweaty, dirt-caked workmen. The air was thick with limestone dust from the quarries, forcing him to put a wet handkerchief against his face whenever he went outside; at night, as he hunched over his drafting board, his thoughts were frequently interrupted by the sounds of men and women carousing in the nearby dormitories. With the exception of Klon, there was no one in Bridgeton with whom he felt comfortable. The workers remained unfriendly toward him, treating him with resentment, as if he were the source of their hardships.

And hardships there were in plenty. Because the matriarch trusted none of the workers, she posted Union Guard soldiers in Bridgeton and Forest Camp to prevent anyone from taking off into the wilderness, and it wasn't long before some of these soldiers began to assume roles as strawbosses. Workers caught resting at any time other than designated breaks were subject to spending the night in the stockade, deprived of food and water. One evening, in the privacy of Garcia's cabin, Klon told him that earlier that day he'd found three guardsmen surrounding a young woman in the mess hall kitchen; only his timely arrival prevented her from being gang-raped. A few days later, a workman on Tower Two fell from the top of the temporary caisson; if someone had dived into the water after him, his life might have been saved, but the guardsman standing watch on the nearby barge thought that he should be able to swim back by himself, and demanded that everyone stay on the job. The current was too swift and the workman was pulled under; he drowned in the channel, his body later found several miles downstream.

These incidents, and others like them, began to open Garcia's eyes. In the past, he'd always been able to maintain a certain distance from his work, his hands remaining clean, his mind focused entirely upon the discrete poetry of physics, the hidden music of mathematics. Yet here on Coyote, there was no room for such luxuries; there was only one brutal day after another, of watching men and women being slowly ground down beneath the burden of his dreams. There was beauty in what they were building, yes, but it was tainted with their suffering . . . and with each passing day, James Garcia perceived the monstrosity that his masterpiece was gradually becoming.

He protested to Luisa Hernandez that his people were being mistreated; she turned a deaf ear, saying that discipline needed to be maintained if the bridge was to be finished before next winter. He tried to talk to Manuel Castro, but the savant was detached from all human feeling, and in his glass eyes Garcia saw only a disturbing reflection of himself. Chris Levin was a little more understanding, but he insisted that there was little he could do; his job was making sure that the barges he built didn't sink. What it all came down to was the fact that Garcia himself was in

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charge . . . and yet, beyond a certain point, his authority was nonexistent. The matriarch wanted nothing more from him than what he'd always done before, and yet he'd found that he was no longer able to do even that.

In desperation, Garcia decided to relocate to the other side of the channel. There was no private cabin for him in Forest Camp, but that didn't matter; he requisitioned a tent and had it erected as far from the mill and the barracks as possible. And so, on Ambriel 91, the last day of the second month of spring, a keelboat transported his drafting board, comp, and books across the East Channel.

Forest Camp offered a little more solitude than Bridgeton. There weren't as many people over there, so subsequently there were fewer soldiers, and most of them tended to be less overbearing. With the absence of quarries, the air was cleaner; demolition work on the Rise had already been completed, so there were no more sudden explosions. Garcia came to know a few of the lumberjacks and mill workers, but otherwise he kept to himself. He spent his days making sure that the truss beams had the proper dimensions, and received regular reports from Klon via his comp. When he grew tired of watching tower construction from the Rise, he went off by himself to meditate, taking short hikes along the timber paths that meandered through the nearby rain forest, now quickly being reduced to vast acres of stumps.

And then, on the afternoon of Muriel 15, he went for a walk and didn't return.

When Garcia failed to show up for dinner, several men took lanterns and went off to look for him. Upon failing to find him, they alerted Bridgeton; within the hour, gyros were making low-level passes above Midland, their searchlights lancing down into the forest, and by daybreak, a squad of soldiers had been ferried across the channel to continue the manhunt. Yet no trace of him was found, nor was there any indication that he'd been attacked by a predator. He had simply vanished.

The search went on for two days, during which time soldiers fanned out across a twenty-mile radius surrounding Forest Camp. They even paddled kayaks down the channel, checking the riverbanks just in case he'd fallen off the Midland Rise and drowned. Nothing, not so much as a shred of clothing or a footprint.

By nightfall of the second day, the search parties had returned to Forest Camp. Proctors were once again questioning those few who had last seen him when someone happened to walk past his tent and noticed that the light was on. Looking inside, he was startled to find the architect sitting at his comp, calmly sorting through the reports that had piled up in his absence, as if nothing had happened.

When Luisa Hernandez received word that Garcia had reappeared, she insisted that he be brought to her at once. Garcia had barely finished a late dinner when he was bustled aboard a gyro and flown to Liberty, where Hernandez, Manny Castro, and Chris Levin were waiting for him. With two guardsmen posted outside her cabin, the matriarch, the savant, and the chief proctor began interrogating the architect as to where he'd been for the last sixty-two hours.

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They were surprised when he informed them that he'd been kidnapped.

He'd been wandering along a timber trail, he said, when three men he'd never seen before emerged from the undergrowth. Before he could resist, they'd pulled his arms behind his back, yanked a bag over his head, and injected him with something that knocked him out. To prove his story, Garcia loosened his shirt collar and showed them a bruise on the right side of his neck where the needle had gone in.

When he woke up, many hours later, he found that he was in a deep cave, apparently somewhere in the hills some distance from the East Channel. The cave entrance was covered with a thick blanket, so he had no idea whether it was day or night, yet there was a fire, with the smoke rising through a chimney vent high above. And he wasn't alone; the three men who had taken him were there, along with a fourth, a young man who identified himself as Rigil Kent.

Levin wanted to learn more about Rigil Kent, but there was little that Garcia could tell him. All four wore bandannas across the lower parts of their faces and never took off their wide-brimmed hats (although Garcia mentioned that Kent wore an old-style ball cap embroidered with the words "URSS *Alabama*"). They carried rifles, and it was made clear to him that he wouldn't leave until they were ready for him to go. Nonetheless he was treated well; he was never roughed up or beaten, and he was given food and water. When he needed to relieve himself, he was led to the back of the cave where a chamberpot had been placed, and when he got tired they gave him a bedroll and let him stretch out next to the fire. But he was never left unguarded, nor did he ever get a good look at his captors' faces.

So why was he there? Castro asked, and Garcia shrugged. They only wanted to know the details of the bridge project: how it was going to be built, what form it would take, when he anticipated that it would be finished. *You didn't tell them, did you?* Of course he did . . . why not? It wasn't as if it was classified information; even the lowliest quarryman knew how the bridge was going to be built. In fact, he was under the impression that they'd been quietly observing the construction effort for quite some time; they'd addressed him by name, and knew that he was the architect and chief engineer. Since there was no point in being stubborn, he told them everything they wished to learn, even tracing sketches in the dirt on the cave floor. *And what happened then?* They knocked him out again. When he came to, he found himself back in the same place where he'd been taken. Indeed, the worst part of his ordeal was retracing his steps in the dark; he got lost a couple of times before he managed to find his tent.

Hernandez, Castro, and Levin made him repeat his story again, with Castro asking him to reiterate various parts of it. They were suspicious, of course—how could Garcia have been taken so far, and then back again, while search parties were looking for him?—yet there was nothing to disprove his story, and enough physical evidence to support it: his clothes were dirty and rumpled, as if he'd slept in them for a couple of days, and he was obviously exhausted. So they told him that they were glad to have him back, and had a soldier walk him to his cabin.

Yet Garcia wasn't allowed to return to Forest Camp. Luisa Hernandez decided that he needed to be kept on a leash, so he continued to work out

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of his cabin in Bridgeton; the few times he crossed the channel to Midland, it was with a proctor constantly at his side.

By then, though, it didn't matter. A plan had been set in motion.

As spring became summer, the bridge grew a little more with each passing day. The piers for the eight support towers were completed in the first month of Verachial, when the last layers of concrete were poured into the caissons, and attention shifted to building the towers themselves. By then, there were almost as many men working on the river at any given time as there were on the shore, with boats moving back and forth across the Narrows, hauling construction material out to the barges anchored next to the piers. It was hard, back-breaking labor for the carpenters on the towers; exhaustion took its toll as accidents began to occur more frequently, causing men to be rushed to the first-aid tent set up on the Midland side.

Every day, James Garcia stood on the Eastern Divide, watching the activity through binoculars as he listened to radio reports from Klon and the other foremen. As the accident rate began to rise, he voiced his concerns to Luisa Hernandez, but she remained adamant in her refusal to let work stop for even a single hour. The matriarch was determined to see the bridge finished by autumn, and would allow nothing to stand in her way. So Garcia quietly decided to take the matter into his own hands.

He began by instituting a regular schedule of job-rotation, reassigning men who'd been on the towers to Bridgeton and Forest Camp, and bringing those who'd been on shore to the river. This slowed things a bit, at least at first, while foremen retrained people in how to handle different jobs, but it also meant that the workmen were given breaks from the repetitive tasks that caused them to become sloppy and careless.

Garcia also had the soldiers removed from the construction site. This took a little more doing, since the matriarch continued to believe that anyone working on the bridge would try to escape if they weren't watched every moment. Yet the architect persisted, pointing out that it was better for morale if the men were able to work without having guns pointed at their backs. Besides, boids had recently been sighted lurking near Bridgeton and Forest Camp; now that the seasons were warm again, the carnivorous avians had returned from the southern regions where they migrated for the winter, and the Union Guard were needed to protect the settlements from these maneaters. Reluctantly, Hernandez agreed, and the soldiers were replaced by proctors.

And Garcia himself started spending more time with the workers. No longer as aloof as he'd once been, he began by going out to the towers, ostensibly to check on their progress but also to see how the guys working on them were doing. He made an effort to memorize their names; very often, at the end of the day, he'd join them for dinner. No longer preferring to sit by himself, he'd carry his plate over from the serving line and take a seat at the long tables between men and women who'd been hauling beam or hammering nails for the last ten hours. They didn't know what to make of this at first, and many remained hostile or suspicious, but gradually he began to make friends among them; soon he began to learn who they were, the individual circumstances that led them to come to Coyote.

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This was good for morale, too, but that wasn't the sole reason why Garcia did this. Through short encounters on the bridge and dinnertime chats, he slowly determined who among them were loyal to the Union and who were not.

By midsummer, the bridge was beginning to take form. Upon each tower base, two A-frame structures were built, cross-braced to provide stability. The towers gradually rose in height from either end of the bridge, with Towers One and Eight eighty feet tall, Towers Two and Seven ninety feet, Towers Three and Six a hundred feet, and Towers Four and Five rising a hundred and ten feet above the Narrows. Once finished, the bridge would be shaped like a longbow, thus allowing for compression at the center span.

The towers were completed on Hamaliel 37, a week ahead of schedule. For the occasion, Luisa Hernandez made a surprise visit. Escorted by a pair of guardsmen—with Savant Castro walking just a few steps behind her and Garcia—the matriarch strode up the packed-earth path leading through the road-cut recently blasted through the Eastern Divide until she reached the end of the unfinished ramp leading to the bridge, and silently gazed out upon the long row of towers that loomed above the East Channel. Derricks bolted to platforms on top of the towers hauled truss beams up from barges; the humid air was filled with the sound of hammers and saws as carpenters worked on temporary scaffolds suspended from the towers.

The matriarch silently observed the activity before her, making a face as she batted at the skeeters that tormented her. Garcia tried to explain what was being done, but it was clear that the details bored her. She only seemed to take interest when she noticed a couple of nearby workmen fastening safety lines around their stomachs and thighs, mountaineering-style.

Seems like a lot of wasted effort, she said, and Garcia informed her that he had mandated this practice as a safety precaution after a couple of men had fallen to their deaths from the towers.

She shrugged as she swatted another skeeter. *Very well. If you think it's important.* Then she turned to smile at him. *Have you given any thought as to what we should call this? Whom we should name it after?*

No, ma'am. Garcia watched the men attaching safety lines to themselves. *I have more important things to think about just now.*

She regarded him coldly. *Perhaps you should take this into consideration,* she replied, then she turned to march away.

Before work commenced on the arches, Garcia had cable-cars installed between the towers. Made of tightly coiled tree vine harvested from the Midland forests and greased with creek-cat fat, the cables were stretched from one tower to the next, with sturdy baskets woven from sourgrass hanging from pulleys running along the cables. Although riding the cable was a hair-raising trip, it was the quickest way to transport workers from one end of the bridge to another, and once they got used to racing along a hundred feet above the channel, many said the commute was the best part of the day.

Providing cheap thrills, though, was the farthest thing from Garcia's

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mind; he also had a quick means of getting people over to Midland. By First Landing Day, Uriel 47, Garcia and Klon had recruited nearly three hundred men and women they knew they could trust; two and three at a time, they were transferred across the channel to Forest Camp, where they switched jobs with people who had been working on the timber crews and at the mill. Since it was all part of the job-rotation system Garcia had set up, the proctors took little notice; only a few foremen were keeping track of who was where at any one time, and most of them had already been enlisted by Garcia.

The arches weren't long enough to support the roadway by themselves; to make up for the distance, and also to relieve the bridge from stress in the event of high winds, Garcia designed bolt-hinged suspension spans that would lie between them. Each of the hundred-foot spans—four in all, practically small bridges in themselves—were built as single-piece units on the wharfs beneath the Midland Rise. Once completed, they would be floated on barges out into the channel, then carefully hoisted into place by the tower derricks.

No one noticed the extra care that was being taken, by millworkers in the Forest Camp, to carve small cavities within the cross-braces of the suspension spans. Each cavity was large enough to contain a one-pound nitro charge, and was hidden by a thin panel through which a tiny hole had been drilled.

The suspension spans were raised during mid-Adnacial, two weeks after the trusswork for the arches was completed. All that was left to be done was the laying of blackwood planks for the roadway and the rigging of solar-powered lights on lampposts. The bridge was nearly finished.

Yet even while preparations were being made for the dedication ceremony, Chris Levin kept a wary eye upon the construction site. Although there had been no further sign of Rigil Kent, the chief proctor was unconvinced that his nemesis had lost interest in the bridge. He pulled the guards out of Forest Camp and posted a twenty-seven hour watch on the bridge itself, with proctors stationed on the roadway and the entrances and more patrolling the channel itself. Yet because they were alert for trouble on shore or on the water, they weren't closely observing the workmen wiring the electrical fixtures, and thus failed to notice where some of the wires were leading.

On the evening of Raphael, Adnachiel 65, in the cool twilight as the sun was setting behind the Eastern Divide, James Alonzo Garcia inspected the bridge one last time. Although there were soldiers every few hundred feet, for the first time in months he walked alone. Hands clasped behind his back, wearing the frock coat that had become increasingly frayed and dirty over the past several months, the architect strolled down the entire length of the bridge, taking a moment to admire his work. Of all the things he'd built, this was his greatest achievement. Aquarius may have been more revolutionary in design, the Stanley Bridge taller and more ambitious, yet this edifice—as yet unchristened, at least until tomorrow—was the thing of which he was the most proud.

And yet he heard no poetry in its arches, felt no music in its towers. He had long since stopped thinking in abstract terms; too many lives had

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been lost, too many injustices had been committed, for him to find any beauty in his accomplishment. The symphony was almost finished; all that remained for him to do was to write the coda.

When he reached the Midland end of the bridge, he found Klon Newell waiting for him. He shook hands with his chief foreman, exchanged a few pleasantries. A meaningful look passed between them, and Klon nodded once. Everything was ready.

Garcia nodded in return. Then he began to walk back toward New Florida, as alone as he had ever been before.

So now it's the following morning, and he stands before the red ribbon stretched across the entrance, the gold shears in his hands poised before the bow. On either side of him, there's an expectant silence. The architect hesitates, then he begins to speak:

"This bridge . . ." Garcia coughs, clearing his dry throat. His voice, picked up by the mic under his left ear, is carried to the crowd behind him by the loudspeakers and reverberates ten seconds later off the Midland Rise. "Pardon me . . . this bridge is the result of months of effort by hundreds of men and women. They've suffered long and hard to bring it into existence. Some of them sacrificed their lives. Nothing I can say will ever make up for this. I just . . . I just . . . "

Uncertain of what to say next, he hesitates. From the corner of his eye, he sees Luisa Hernandez staring at him. This isn't what she expected: a few words extolling the virtues of social collectivism, perhaps, or promises of the riches to be found in the mountains of Midland.

"Others would like to claim this bridge for themselves," he continues, steadfastly refusing to meet the matriarch's angry gaze. "They would claim credit for the work of others, but they must be told that all this wasn't done in their name. We didn't build this for them . . . we built it for ourselves, for our own future." He hesitates. "What we'll call this is not for me to decide, but for you. Let history give it a name. My work is done."

Then he turns to look at the matriarch. "But this . . . *this* is for *you,* ma'am," and then he cuts the ribbon.

A thin wire was concealed within the fabric of the ribbon, which led to a detonator hidden beneath Tower One. When Garcia severed it, he tripped the detonator, which in turn caused an electrical charge to be sent to nitroglycerin charges concealed within the crossbeams of the suspension spans. A quick succession of thunderous explosions echoed off the limestone walls of the Eastern Divide and the Midland Rise, and the spans toppled into the channel.

From the New Florida side of the Narrows, there was a collective gasp of horror from the officials standing nearby. From the Midland side, though, a loud cheer rose from the hundreds of people whose freedom Garcia had secretly arranged over the past few months, as they watched the spans crash into the channel, leaving behind only a series of towers and arches unconnected to one another. The few proctors and Union Guard soldiers remaining on the eastern side of the channel were caught unprepared for the mob that descended upon them; a couple of them tried

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to resist, but they were quickly brought down, with the rest forced to flee for boats anchored beneath the bluffs.

The bridge could be repaired, of course . . . but not until the following spring, when it would become possible to replace the suspension spans. But the seasonal currents within East Channel would not permit restoration work before next year, and new beams would have to harvested from the few remaining stands of blackwood on the western side of New Florida. By then, the men and women of Forest Camp had escaped into the Midland wilderness, where they were met by Rigil Kent's compatriots, eager to enlist those ready to resist the Western Hemisphere Union.

Yet Garcia was not among them.

To this day, no one knows why he didn't take the chance to escape. The cable-car had been left intact for this very purpose; the moment he severed the ribbon, the plan called for him to run over to it, jump aboard, and race across the Narrows, going from tower to tower until he made his way to Midland.

Yet he didn't follow through with it. Instead, Garcia kept his back turned toward the bridge even as it was being ruined by his own hand, and calmly waited for a couple of soldiers to put him under arrest and take him away. Perhaps he realized that escape was futile, that he would have been shot before he made it to the first tower. Or perhaps, as others have speculated, he knew that there was only one way this particular poem could end.

Whatever the reason, Garcia spent the next two days in the Liberty stockade, a windowless log cabin built by the original settlers. He was doubtless interrogated, and equally without doubt he told his interrogators everything that he knew, yet there was little useful information that he could have revealed; the bridge was ruined, his accomplices already vanished. Eyewitnesses would later say that the last time he was known to be alive was when the matriarch and two Union Guard soldiers paid him a visit. A gunshot was heard, and the following morning it was announced that he had hanged himself.

James Alonzo Garcia was buried in the Shuttlefield graveyard, beneath a tombstone that only bore his name. The bridge he built was eventually repaired. On official maps, it was marked as the Matriarch Hernandez Bridge, but that's not what it came to be called. The locals know it as the Garcia Narrows Bridge.

They also claim that, in the twilight hours just after the sun goes down behind the Eastern Divide, you can sometimes see him walking across it, as if admiring his creation one more time. ○

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COAL ASH AND SPARROWS

Michael J. Jasper

Michael J. Jasper recently finished his fourth novel, which is set on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and features the headless ghost of Blackbeard, a haunted shipwreck, and surly elderly tourists. His short fiction publications include stories in *Strange Horizons, S1ngularity, Future Orbits, The Book of More Flesh, Writers of the Future,* and The Raleigh *News & Observer*. Mr. Jasper lives with his wife Elizabeth in Raleigh, NC. His website is located at *http://www.michaeljasper.net.*

Lina Seymour had been putting off going into the barn all day. Less than a week ago, the doctor had come to tell her, her mother, and her younger sister about her father's fall from the church roof. Daddy had been working with a crew of three other men, trying to finish shingling the roof of the new Petersburg church before a storm blew up. The rickety old wooden ladder on which he'd been standing had given way when he reached for a fistful of shingles. He'd lingered for almost four days, his face and body swollen and unfamiliar in the back room of the doctor's office. Then, two days ago, he'd simply let out a long sigh and never drew in another breath.

One of the few coherent sentences he'd mumbled to Lina during those awful hours had been something about a ship, a train, and three strange words.

Still wearing her black dress, Lina crept into the barn the day after her father was buried and found the book. It was barely bigger than her hand, with an unadorned white cover and only the number four printed on the spine. She would have missed the book completely if she hadn't reached down to wipe her dusty hands on her late father's old fleece-lined hunting jacket. When she let go of the jacket, the book slipped onto her

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bare foot. Young Lina let out a tiny meeping sound: the small white book was icy cold to the touch. In the years to come, she would never be sure if she actually found the book, or if the book found her.

Shivering in the drafty barn, she pulled her mother's shawl closer around her thin shoulders and stared at the book that had presented itself to her like a gift. In her right hand, she held the sheaf of documents her mother had sent her to the barn to find. She'd found all of them neatly stacked in the dusty steamer trunk her grandparents had given Daddy years ago. The hand-me-down trunk was a kind of good-natured joke with the family. As a farmer in northeastern Iowa, her father had rarely traveled; the cows and crops demanded all of his time, not to mention that of his wife and two daughters. For all Lina knew, Daddy had never left the state.

Lina had always wanted to fill that big steamer trunk with her own souvenirs from around the globe. Unlike her father, she wanted to *see* the world and travel more than an hour away from home. She had once ridden with her father to Dubuque, a painful ride on their wagon that seemed to last forever, but once they had arrived at the Mississippi River, all of Lina's hurts disappeared when she saw the great paddlewheel boat pass by, heading south. Her dream of crisscrossing the world, however, ended the moment she touched the white book.

Lina gently set the papers on top of the steamer trunk and turned up the wick of her lantern. At some point, night had fallen outside the barn window. Mother will be looking for me soon, she thought, though her mother hadn't risen from bed all day. The house was too quiet and dark without Daddy's voice filling and lighting it as he sang nonsense songs with Lina and her sister and laughed at their stories. Mother was too sad, and neither Lina nor Jenny felt like singing ever again. In the now-cool barn, Lina covered her legs in her father's hunting coat and picked up the tiny white book.

Another shiver ran through her at the book's touch, and a puff of her own breath clouded around her face as she exhaled. She opened the cover with a trembling hand, realizing in the back of her mind that the book was no longer icy cold, but almost warm, inviting her to lose herself in its thin pages.

She whispered the ornately written word on the first page of the tiny book: "Magic?" Her thin voice echoing in her ears, Lina Seymour settled in and began to read.

Joseph McAndrew was the first boy from his orphanage to volunteer to ride the trains west. At ten years old, he was already bigger than most of the other children in the rambling white house south of the city. He knew that his chances of being brought home with any of the few prospective parents that came to visit the orphanage were slim, and probably none. With his unruly black hair and dark eyes, he also knew he was not adorable like the other Irish children with their milky skin and brilliant blue eyes. Joseph was a realistic ten-year-old. An orphan train was his only chance to escape.

The Children's Aid Society and the Foundling Hospital, along with a few clergymen and dealmakers in New York City, had dreamed up the so-

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called orphan trains. The facts were simple: Families in Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan needed extra hands with the harvest and the endless chores on their farms; orphanages were overflowing with immigrant children and waifs abandoned in the city. The first orphan trains began their westward journeys in late fall of 1854, and Joseph was determined to be on one of them. I could be like Father John Murphy at Boolavogue and Vinegar Hill, he thought, traveling into the great unknown to do battle. His mother would have sung a song about him, if she had survived the voyage from Ireland.

Behind the front desk of the orphanage, arranged like mailboxes or tiny safes for the rooms in a hotel, were stacked dozens of small, square boxes. Each cardboard box belonged to a different child in the orphanage, stuffed with the child's belongings and papers. The orphanage provided the children with donated clothing—rough woolen shirts and scratchy cotton pants, two pairs of socks, and undergarments, all faded browns and grays—so their boxes held all that mattered in each child's life. Once a week, the children were allowed to look inside their boxes.

Until the day he left on the train, Joseph skipped his time with his box. He had already memorized the three pieces of paper inside of it, though he never let on to the others that he could read. In the months before his mother and father took him to the shipyards of Dublin, his mother had taught him his letters and read with him every day. As a reward, his mother would sing about Ireland and the heroes of the land. Joseph had learned quickly.

Along with his birth certificate, his passport, and his ship's receipt from the *Odessa,* the box also contained a small white book. The book was a gift from his eccentric great-uncle, a great black-haired bear of a man who was well known in their small Irish town as a world traveler. Joseph had only known the man as "Mo," though he was sure—despite the fogginess that filled his brain any time he tried to remember specific details about the man—that "Mo" was not his great-uncle's real name. Joseph doubted that Mo was even his great-uncle; the big man certainly didn't look Irish, with his dark skin and big brown eyes.

Great-Uncle Mo had given the book to Joseph three years ago, back in Ireland, without his parents' knowledge. Joseph had told nobody about the book, and hadn't ever seen Mo again. On the unending, seasick ship ride on the *Odessa* from Dublin to New York City that had taken the life of his mother by pneumonia and nearly killed his father from dysentery, Joseph had filled his days with the words of the white book he'd been given by his great-uncle Mo.

That changed upon his arrival in the orphanage five months later, after his father had forgotten about him and could only remember his last and next drink. He had tried to put the book and its contents out of his thoughts. In his cot next to the forty-two other boys in the sleeping room, the contents of the book had given him nightmares, blurry visions of white-blue lightning and arrows of unholy green fire. I am not the hero I believed I was, Joseph thought, waking from his dreams with tears in his eyes. He left the book in its box, never revisiting it.

Of the strange words in the book—*Words,* Joseph always thought of

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them, like proper names—of the strange Words in the book, Joseph would remember only three, and they would come back to him only once, sixteen years later, his mouth dry and tasting of coal ash.

Nine-year-old Lina Seymour held the book in small hands that no longer shook. The lantern had burned low, almost out of fuel, and she could hear her mother calling her name, but she could not stop reading.

The book was proving to her something that she'd always thought, always *wished,* was true: that there was more to life than cooking for a hungry, weary husband, more than scrubbing floors, clothes, and dirty children's faces. More than a hardscrabble life of working the land, following the lead of a man like her dead father as they scraped through another season. The book told her what she had always longed to know.

Lina forced her gaze away from the tiny print of the book and closed her eyes. She saw brilliant green and blue flashes under her eyelids as she thought about those words.

I must be dreaming, she thought, blinking her eyes in the gloomy darkness of the barn. There's nothing extraordinary here on our farm, and especially not inside me.

"Lina?" her mother's hoarse voice called once more, with finality. The screen door to the house slammed shut. Lina heard but did not register the sounds. She was reading again, her thin white lips moving with each sentence, all doubts erased by the small words in the book she held inches from her face. The author was right there, inside her mind, filling her with a steady diet of insight, potentiality, and desire. Words passed from her unblinking eyes directly into her imagination faster than the beat of her heart.

Magic existed, the book repeated over and over, *and it was inside of her.* She wanted to shout it to the rafters of the barn. This knowledge was better than any trip to see the Mississippi, more wonderful than watching a paddlewheel float past. *Magic!*

Determined to learn more, Lina Seymour remained in the barn for the next one hundred and thirty-one years.

Joseph sat on the first passenger car behind the coal car, his lungs full of ash and his mouth painfully dry. He held his small valise on his lap the entire trip, afraid to let it out of his sight and risk losing his ticket and the paper containing the names of his new mother and father. Also inside his valise were a change of clothes and his three pieces of identification folded into his small white book. Right before leaving, Joseph had thrown the square cardboard box that once held his entire life far into the orphanage fireplace. I'm ready for the Camolin Cavalry, he thought, walking out of the orphanage to meet his train.

He fought the temptation to slip the white book out of his bag and read to pass the long, swaying hours of his train ride west. But a deep, laughing voice filled his head every time he even thought about pulling out the book. "It is not yours to read any more," the voice said. "You've already read it on one trip. The book must go to someone else now. One journey is all you get in this life, my boy."

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Joseph closed his eyes and let the rhythm of the metal wheels on the smooth iron rails below rock him to sleep. He dreamed he was back on the Ellis Island-bound *Odessa* and his mother was still singing about Irish soldiers defending Erin's lovely home and his father hadn't started drinking and stopped caring. Their laughter brought tears to his sleeping eyes.

When he woke, he was in Iowa, at a station in the river city of Dubuque. He pulled himself painfully from his seat, his legs asleep, and stumbled out of the ash-filled passenger car to meet his adoptive family. His first vision of his new life was the slow, muddy Mississippi, framed by the brown banks of Illinois to the east and the skeletal railroad bridge to the north. Joseph caught himself wishing for the familiar desperation of the orphanage walls. Luckily, the sensation lasted only as long as it took him to walk onto the platform to meet the strangers who had paid for his trip west.

The Seymours, his new family, lived on a farm outside Petersburg, forty miles west of Dubuque, and all of them spoke German, and German only. The ride home in the horse-drawn wagon took close to four hours, and Joseph was close to crying from the violent jouncing of the wagon on the dirt roads. His ears were full of harsh-sounding, foreign words, though the words were spoken by gentle people who smiled at him often and gave him food to eat.

The sun was down by the time they arrived at the big white farmhouse, and, for a bad moment, Joseph thought that he had returned to the orphanage, the two big buildings looked so much alike. Then his vision cleared, and he saw dark, flat fields on either side of him and blue sky stretched above him instead of rows of apartments and distant factory smoke clotting the gray air. He went inside to clean up, sleep, and begin his new life. He never thought about the orphanage again.

Five years passed in the blink of an eye.

Joseph left school at fifteen, married his neighbor Anne-Marie at sixteen, and was a father at seventeen. By the time he was twenty, when his first daughter Lina was three and his second daughter Jenny was walking and talking, he felt as if he'd accomplished much in his life. He spoke both English and German fluently, and he lived with his wife in a house he and his father and three brothers had built, fifty feet away from the big farmhouse. He attended church weekly, prayed daily, and though he was not like the heroes from his mother's songs, Joseph felt that his was a life that had been blessed and was full of light.

Six years later, he would be pounding nails into the roof of the new church, balancing shingles on a borrowed ladder, as a storm approached.

Lina talked to her father while she slowly lost her mind during the rest of the nineteenth century and all of the twentieth century.

"I forgive you for wishing I was a boy," she said, whispering words in the stuffy barn that she'd never been able to say to her father while he was alive. Tears filled her eyes as she twisted strands of hair around her fingers and pulled. "Someone to carry on the family name and a strong back to help with the work. I'll make it up to you, Daddy. Just watch me."

When she ran out of words, Lina was left with the world of the barn and the contents of the little white book.

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The barn itself held untold mysteries. Two stories high, the interior felt as if it took up more space that it appeared to on the outside. Lina could walk for close to an hour and never retrace her steps or cross her path. She avoided the shadowy areas, especially the corner where the rusted tools sat like a death waiting to happen, and spent most of her time in the loft. Up a sturdy ladder, the hayloft ran the length of three-fourths of the barn, leaving only a rectangular gap in the middle where the ladder was positioned. If she climbed to the top of the stacked bales of hay, she could see outside through the hole that a woodpecker had knocked into the wall by the roof. Only half of the loft was filled with hay, and it was in this half that Lina spent most of her time, reading.

The first thing she learned from the book was how to make sparks fly out of her fingertips. Luckily, she hadn't burned down the barn with that trick, or its more advanced counterpart, lightning bolts. The hay had been damp from a recent rain in the spring of 1873, though dates no longer mattered to Lina. For her, a year passed as quickly as sneezing or breaking wind.

Lina also learned how to levitate—chapter five—and how to catch small animals in a net of binding energy—chapter eight—for her meals. Spark-roasted rat and sparrow were her usual delicacies. The energy she expended catching and cooking her meals exhausted her, and she would sleep for at least half a week after eating. Life in the barn, Lina thought on the rare occasions she let herself be distracted from her book, was good.

Just before the turn of the century, another family bought the farm from Lina's younger sister Jenny, who had never married and had become a sour old maid at the age of thirty-five. Neither Jenny nor the new tenants had ever paid a visit to the barn, which was barely visible to the outside world (unless it was foggy and the temperature was between fifty and fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit, and even then it was just a red blur next to the cow pasture).

In the last month of 1899, Lina had her first visitor.

She had been taking a break from the book for a few months. After searching its pages endlessly for a lesson on how to fly, she'd thrown the book at the wall in frustration. That four on the spine haunted her. Were there three other books? Or even more than that? Maybe book five talked about flight. It sure as blazes wasn't in Book Four. Lina had glared at the book lying on a pile of rotting, half-burnt hay, and began chatting again with her dead father.

"On the day the doctor told us the news, Jenny and I had been skipping our chores, Daddy." She wiped tears from her face with a hand that was thin and spidery, unfamiliar in her clearing eyes. Everything for the past decade had been a blur. She blamed it on too much book-reading. "Mama was so mad at us. She said we'd have to tell you about it when you got back from roofing the church. But we never got a chance to."

Lina trailed off on the one hundred and eighty-ninth time she'd confessed this to her father's memory. Against the far wall of the barn, above the pump where she drew water from a well that had yet to run dry, a sparrow perched on the steamer trunk and stared at her.

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Lina tried to remember the Words of Binding from the book, but she couldn't recall if it had been chapter five or eight. She hadn't eaten in over a week. Then she realized that the book was on the other side of the barn, sitting where she'd thrown it. Before she could stand up and get it, the sparrow began to talk.

"I heard you were here," the sparrow said in a high-pitched, stuttering voice. Its last word was repeated five times—"here-here-here-here-here!" The sparrow stretched its short neck closer to Lina, as if inspecting her. "You're not much to look at, are-are-are-are-are you?"

"Come closer," Lina said, fighting the impulse to inch toward the bird herself. She remained very still, holding her breath.

The sparrow cocked its head to the side as if smiling at her. "Your great-great unc-unc-unc-unc-uncle's shade told me you'd be close to this barn. Didn't tell me you'd be *living* here-here-here-here-here!"

"I like it here," Lina said, inching closer. The Words of Binding had come back to her, even though it had been weeks since she'd last practiced them. Her blood began to swirl hot and cold through her veins as the power vested in the Words filled her. She was hungry. "It's safe here. Even if I fall, like my Daddy, I'll always land in hay. Come closer."

"So you've been reading the book-book-book-book-book?"

Lina was ten feet from the sparrow. A bitter, ashy taste filled the back of her throat. "Who wants to know? Whose business is it but mine?"

The sparrow gave its cocked-head smile again and didn't answer. It gave what to Lina's eyes looked like a nod, and then gestured with its dirty beak at the book on the far side of the barn. "It's ev-ev-ev-ev-everyone's business, miss. You must keep that book safe until the right-right-right-right-right person comes looking for it."

Lina was having trouble following the sparrow's words. She was so very hungry. "I'm going to have to ask you," Lina said, her muscles shaking as she prepared herself to leap, "to leave now, Mr. Sparrow."

The sparrow remained sitting on the trunk, watching her. It lifted one leg and set it back down, then did the same with the other, never taking its black eyes off the tensed woman on the other side of the barn.

Lina couldn't wait any longer. She dove at the bird, shouting Words of Binding. But already the bird was gone, twittering loudly as it flashed past Lina's bird's-nest hair. The sparrow gave her a good peck on the back of her head before arcing toward the hole in the ceiling. Thunder rumbled across the sky, and rain began to fall against the dirty barn windows.

Lina put her right hand on her wounded head and screamed. Sparks flew from her left hand, catching the sparrow just before the bird made it out through the hole to safety. Cackling, Lina caught the bird before it hit the hay-covered floor and shoved it into her mouth. Two feathers puffed out of her mouth and into the air, but Lina caught them and swallowed them as well. She chewed, a thoughtful expression on her dirty, lined face.

"Nobody's business but my own," she said, swallowing. "Not ev-ev-ev-ev-everyone's business."

The bird had tasted like mud, accompanying the bitter, ashy taste the Words had left in her mouth. There were coarse hairs on her tongue when she burped. She spit out as many hairs as she could and dropped to the

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floor for a nap as her lunch digested. Rain spattered on the roof and dripped through the hole in the ceiling. The rain fell on the book and bounced off harmlessly. The book was safe.

Lina wouldn't have another visitor for a hundred and two years.

Joseph had always believed in hard work and giving of his time and his strong back, so on that windy day in October, 1870, he found himself balancing a hammer, a bag of nails, and a sheath of shingles on a forty-foot ladder on the church roof of Petersburg.

He'd never been afraid of heights, but, being a man of the land and crops and dirt, he'd never been higher than the second story of his barn. Eyes focused on the section of roof directly in front of him, Joseph calmed himself by thinking of his girls. Jenny's giggle and Lina's high-pitched, bird-like voice filled his head, and he smiled. She'd sung him "Ring Around the Rosie" that morning after he came in from the milking, before he left for church. The girls had danced around him while he ate his breakfast, falling giggling to the floor at the end of the song.

The morning passed and the rows of shingles slowly crept up the side of the church roof like a growing shadow, one shingle at a time. Keeping his weight forward on the ladder, fighting the harsh pitch of the roof, Joseph wielded his hammer with five times the care than he'd use if his legs were planted firmly on the ground.

When the ladder started to tremble under him, he felt as if the moment he'd been waiting for all morning had finally become reality, just by his trying so hard to avoid it. As the wooden rung under his feet cracked, Joseph saw three small words—*Words,* his panicked mind had corrected him—in front of his eyes. He shouted the Words with all his energy, scrabbling for the roof with his hands. He began to fall, and his hammer, the nails, and the shingles he'd been holding all fell to the hard dirt below.

"Ring around the rosie," Lina and Jenny's voices sang in his head.

Joseph remained hanging in midair over a ladder that was now lying on the ground in two pieces. His mouth went dry, and he tasted something harsh and bitter, like coal ash, on his tongue.

"Pocket full of posies . . ."

Joseph was levitating. Just as the book said he would, if he said the Words properly. His heart hammered in his chest, the throbbing like the engine of the ship he'd felt on his cot in the *Odessa,* lying on his stomach as he read the tiny white book from his great uncle, over and over. Joseph was levitating. Just as he had once levitated in the ship, a full two feet above his cot. Until his father walked in the door and whipped him, all the while cursing Mo's name.

"Ashes, ashes. . . ."

I don't believe this, he thought, his legs dangling under him like useless pieces of scrap wood. With a childish laugh, he kicked out as if he were swimming in mid-air. His worn-out left boot slipped off his foot and fell to the ground below, hitting with a dull thud. He looked at the church roof, five feet away from him, and the broken ladder on the ground under him.

"I forbid you to ever read this book again," his father had shouted that day in their tiny room on the *Odessa,* ripping it from Joseph's hands. He

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took it to the deck and threw it overboard, but the next morning the book had reappeared in Joseph's valise.

As if the memory of his father's anger made him realize that what he had been doing for the past five seconds was impossible, Joseph Seymour felt the magic drain from his body. No longer levitating, he dropped to the unforgiving ground forty feet below.

When Lina turned sixty-five, unbeknownst to anyone else around her—her family having forgotten her after her disappearance, as if she'd never really existed in their world at all—she made her first attempt to leave the barn. She'd been thinking about Jenny, singing songs with her, and she wanted to give her mother the documents she'd been sent to retrieve decades ago.

The sheaf of yellowed, brittle documents in her hand, Lina opened the door and was greeted by a dozen sparrows. All of them stared at her in the same curious way as the first sparrow had all those years ago, moments before she'd eaten it. Two of the sparrows had darker feathers than the others, brownish-black in color.

"You are the guar-guar-guar-guar-guardian," the first black sparrow said.

"You can't leave-leave-leave-leave-leave," the second black sparrow said.

"Oh yes," Lina said, her breath coming to her in short bursts as the bright sun hit her skin and blinded her for a heartbeat. I am no simple guardian, she thought. I've read the book and learned the Words. I am a sorceress. "Oh yes . . . I can. . . ."

"Your journey is not com-com-com-com-complete!"

Lina paused and looked up at the sparrow talking to her, a twin of the brown bird she had eaten years ago. "What journey? I've been nowhere, nowhere but this barn!"

"One journey is all you get-get-get-get-get."

More sparrows joined the first row of mud-colored birds as she struggled to lift her now-heavy legs. She had yet to cross over the threshold of the barn and enter the yard. She lifted her leg to step closer to the outside world. Nowhere but here, she thought to herself.

The birds took to the air, blocking the bright rays of the sun, turning day into night. They flew up as if of one mind and body and turned on Lina, who stood with her foot still suspended in the air. They flew closer, and she screamed. She scrambled in her mind to find the Words that would dispel the sparrows, but nothing came. Finally able to move, she slammed the door shut before tiny beaks embedded themselves in her skin, instead thudding harmlessly off the wooden barn door. In the barn, she was safe.

Never again will I try to leave, Lina thought, shaking hands searching for the comfort of her plain white book. The yellow documents from her father fluttered to the floor, forgotten. Never again.

Moammar had always had a special place in his heart for his great-nephew Joseph. Though he knew the boy would never truly *understand*

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him or the way he could never stay in one place for longer than a few weeks, Mo had taken a shine to the boy. With the thought always in the back of his mind that Joseph could be the next One, he did his best to make the boy's life special.

Like the time Mo had taken Joseph and his mother to the ocean to watch the dolphins race, and Mo had let a piece of Joseph go out toward the salt water and enter one of the dolphins for a few wondrous seconds. Moammar went out with him into another dolphin, and the waves touched his and Joseph's new bodies like caresses. They kicked their tails and dove out of the water as if they were both filled with lightning. When Mo brought Joseph back to himself, he watched the boy with an intense smile, one not unlike the smile made by a curious sparrow years later.

This could be all yours, my boy, Moammar had thought—but not said—at the time. Joys like this, and so much more.

On another visit, months later, a much less relaxed Mo pulled his chair close to Joseph the instant Joseph's parents left the room. Joseph had been seven years old at the time. Moammar was rushed for time, and he hoped his voice would not betray him.

"Joseph," Mo said. "I have something for you."

"What?" Joseph said, unable to contain himself. "What did you get me, Mo?"

Mo answered by passing him a book. The older man stifled a grin as Joseph tried to hide his disappointment from his great-uncle.

"A book?"

"Not just any book," Mo said, tapping the small book's plain cover. He forced himself to speak slowly and not rush. "A book of power. More power than you could imagine. Think of swimming with the dolphins last month. This book holds secrets like that, and more. And I want you to have it, my boy."

Joseph's small hand shook as he reached for the book. "Why me?" he squeaked. "I'm just a boy."

"Time is short, Joseph. Just read the book, let the Words enter your mind, and remember them." Running his big hands through his beard, Mo gazed out the window at something in the distance. A puff of dust had been raised on the dirt road coming from Dublin. Mo felt his face tighten, and his words came faster. The sorcerers of the Fist may be sending someone to get me, he thought with a shudder. It had been a long time since he'd had to do battle, and he knew he'd have to fight his former colleagues who would be using their new magic. He cleared his throat and looked down at the waiting boy next to him. "Just remember that the power of the book can be fickle. It may fail you when you need it most, or if you show the slightest doubt. And it will always look to find the most powerful person around, abandoning you if you appear to be weak. So be confident and strong, and you will be our next hero."

"What. . . ?"

Mo shook his head. "No more questions. Just be confident and strong, Joseph, and remember what you read in here."

Joseph looked at the small book in his hands. He slid his dirty hand down the front of the book, but his finger left no track on the white cover.

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In a few seconds, Joseph was engrossed in reading, his mouth slightly open and his eyes wide.

Moammar slipped out of the house without a look back at the boy and his book.

Short minutes after that, the tall man with the black-and-gray beard and dark complexion let out a long breath and set his knapsack onto a park bench four miles away. An instant later, he collapsed onto the bench himself. Someone had been calling to him for the last month, a familiar voice from his past, an old acquaintance from the long-ago times. Before Moammar Grayson Avitular had given up on that life, as part of the Sorcerers of the Hand. And now that old friend was calling him back. Back to Stonehenge, where the Druids had begun their teachings about magic, before magic split into two competing factions.

Moammar didn't want to go, but he had no choice if he was to help close this rift.

He had made his last stop before his ship left Dublin for England. He hoped he'd done the right thing. If the magic of research and knowledge that he had always believed in was to continue, the Sorcerers of the new, more aggressive magic could not be allowed to find the book or its counterparts. The five books had been spread to the corners of the world, their final destinations hidden from all other Sorcerers. Moammar's old friend Ishi had confided in him that the users of the new magic were calling it the Fist. The name was an insult to the teachings of the Hand, and a good portion of the hopes of the older magic rested with the young boy that Moammar had just entrusted with one of the books of magic. It was a massive responsibility for a boy as young as Joseph, but again, Mo had no choice in the matter.

Digging a box of mud and a square tin of horsehair from his bag, Moammar clucked and shook his head. Joseph would never have been his first choice, but there was something in the boy, even if he was only seven, that gave him hope. And in times like these, beggars couldn't afford to be choosers. If only he knew for sure that Joseph, or even Joseph's descendants, could handle this task and not let the book fall into the wrong hands! And there were the other four books to consider as well.

Moammar rolled a handful of mud in horsehair, and began shaping the mud into a tiny, bird-like figure. He'd check back on Joseph when he could, after he returned from Stonehenge. Setting the tiny sparrow made of mud and horsehair on the bench next to him, Moammar stood. Until then, just like the sparrow he left behind, Joseph's future was out of his hands.

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The mud sparrow shook itself once, then took off toward the west, in the direction of the McAndrew house. Moammar would never again see Ireland or his great-nephew while he was alive.

In May of 2001, at the age of one hundred and forty, Lina Seymour sat hunched over the pristine pages of the white book of magic that she had been reading for most of her life.

Her black dress had been worn away to next to nothing, and her father's hunting jacket was wrapped around her waist, now part of her dress. Half of her white hair lay scattered around her on the floor, and what remained on her head stuck up at wild angles that formed identifiable shapes. She weighed less than eighty pounds, and her mind was quite gone.

She lifted her head and squinted out the upper window. Someone was approaching the barn. A young, dark-skinned girl with a determined crease in her forehead, carrying three small white objects clutched to her chest. As Lina watched, the girl slipped the square objects with great care into the backpack she was wearing. They were *books,* Lina realized.

Lina lifted herself from the wood floor and caught herself crying. She didn't know if it was with relief or fear. And were those books, she thought, for me?

"I have a guest, Daddy," she whispered. "I hope you don't mind if I go out to greet her."

Scurrying down the ladder from her second-floor roost, she let go of her own white book, which had turned cold in her gnarled hand, and covered it with hay. Gasping for breath, she pulled the steamer trunk in front of the pile of hay.

"Now stay there," she said to the book, even as her small hands ached for the comforting weight of it again.

With a shaky breath and a quivering stride, Lina Seymour opened the barn door, and, having skipped all of the twentieth century, stepped into the twenty-first. She pulled the door closed behind her. No sparrows were in sight, and her mouth was filled with the taste of coal ashes. She made it half a dozen steps before facing the young girl, who was only five feet away.

"Why are you here?" Lina said, raising her voice, but still sounding like a bird's cheeping. The girl stopped, looking past Lina through the open door of the barn.

"I think you know what I came for, ma'am," the girl said.

Lina squinted at her. The girl couldn't have been more than thirteen years old. Her skin was dark, like Daddy's coffee blended with a touch of cream, and her long black hair was thick and curly. In all of her life Lina hadn't seen anyone who looked like this, and she stared, mouth open. Then she remembered the book, hidden behind the trunk.

As if reading her thoughts, the girl nodded. "There's something out there that's bigger than both of us. It's called the Fist, and I need that book of yours to fight them. They've been gathering forces for longer than either of us has been alive. I'd rather fight them than fight you." The girl gently set her backpack onto the long grass in front of the barn and

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stepped closer. "I hope you understand, ma'am. I can't leave here without that book."

Tears slipped from Lina's eyes even as she began running the Words through her mind. The calm voice of the girl in front of her threatened to unnerve her. She caught herself in the act of turning back to the barn to retrieve the book for the girl. A sparrow fluttered to the ground from her right and sat on a tree stump a few feet away, as if watching and waiting.

I can't let you take the book, Lina thought, the wild rush of magic flowing through her ancient body. She answered the girl at last with the most powerful spell she knew: lightning bolts.

The battle waged that day lasted less than three hundred seconds. Witnessed only by a growing crowd of brown sparrows, the two women threw bursts of blue lightning and white energy back and forth across the Iowa countryside at each other, scorching the sides of the old red barn and digging deep divots into the black earth. Lina Seymour fought with all she had, but her strength and her ability were not enough.

By the time Lina realized the painful truth, that her destiny had never been sorcery, it was already too late. Her incomplete knowledge of magic and her untrained skill could only carry her so far. She thought of the three Words her father had whispered to her on his deathbed. Her body racked with pain from the magical attacks of the young girl as well as with her new knowledge of her misspent life, she spoke her final Words on this Earth.

As Lina began to lift gently from the ground, the girl tried to stop her final, fiery attack, a blue globe of flame intended to subdue the older woman. The ball of magical fire slammed into Lina, who was laughing and crying as she levitated two feet above the ground.

Her final thought had been that she was finally—after so much time spent reading her book—*flying*.

Through his sparrows, the shade of Moammar had witnessed the battle that had been over a century in the making, and he was inordinately proud of both of his descendants. The young girl, the great-granddaughter of the illegitimate son of Jennifer Seymour, Lina's sister, not only walked away with the fourth book, but she also knew where to find the fifth and final book of magic (which, among many other procedures, detailed how to fly). Before he could rest in his stony grave just outside Stonehenge, his final act as a benevolent spirit was to enfold the brittle soul of the book's guardian, Lina Seymour, close to him.

"Lina," Moammar said to the thin woman levitating between death and life. "Your life was neither wasted nor misspent." He held out a hand to her. "Come travel with me, at last."

Lina looked at him with surprise and a hint of recognition. He was dressed in white robes containing bits of mud and clumps of horsehair. She gave a tiny nod as her ears filled with the soft voice of a woman, singing about Ireland.

Yes, she thought, tasting coal ash on her tongue. I deserve this.

After nearly a century and a half of life, Lina Seymour's great-great-uncle Moammar guided her into the afterworld, and they were accompanied by a flock of chittering, mud-colored sparrows. O

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Unlikely to Happen Any Time Soon

I sometimes think about
what it would be like
to live on an ant's back.
I'd hold onto that
smooth hard shell,
vibrating like bones
in an earthquake
from her tiny heart,
and we'd crawl together
over juicy nasturtium buds.
If the colony sensed
some melted chocolate
several yards away
we'd be off for the good
of all, a road trip
over any terrain,
pushing on tirelessly
to retrieve that
precious sustenance.
The rest of the ants
would always be with us,
their collective mind
showing us the way.
My host's antennae would
wave confidently in front
of me, like twin batons
orchestrating the journey
of her life. She'd be
playing out the score
of a hundred million years
and I'd sleep, protected
by her delicate purrs.

—Mario Milosevic

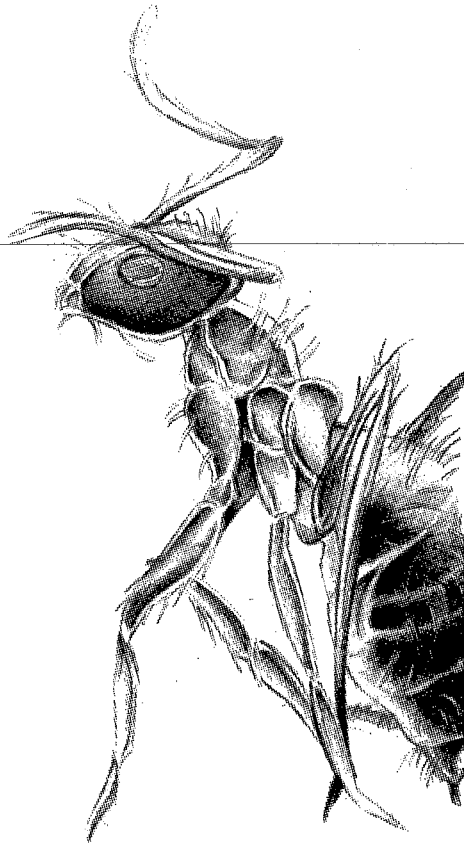

Illustration by June Levine

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THIS OLD MAN

Steven Popkes

Steven Popkes lives on what he hopes one day will be the smallest farm in Massachusetts. He's a licensed pilot employed by a company that builds aviation instrumentation. Mr. Popkes is currently at work on a novel that involves, among other things, televangelists, call girls, the drug trade, and the nature of religion.

The roar of the spring birds woke me up. Every morning for two weeks in April, the birds returning north scream, yell, and mutter to each other in the mulberry tree outside my window. Not that they're quiet at night; just less vocal.

I stood up, lost my balance, and sat back down again. It's a spring curse on the stumbling, bleary-eyed, and sleepless. I stood up again and leaned against the window, threw it open. An explosion of wings and a brief moment of peace as a couple of thousand birds vacated my windowsill for another part of the tree. I stared up at them. They stared back at me.

Raib, my elder brother, was oblivious to the birds, the sun, or the window. It had been his night off, and he'd spent it night-fishing—a euphemism for sitting around the campfire drinking corn whisky and singing. He was well-liked, my brother, for his dancing and his singing, neither of which I can do.

I shook him. "Wake up. It's morning."

He shook his head and pulled the blanket over his head. "Go away, Lem. I was up late last night with King Leo's men." He groaned. "Now, *they* know how to put it away!"

I kicked his foot under the covers and he pulled the pillow over his head. I let him be. He'd be awake by noon and presentable by six when he went on duty. I was always proud of my brother. He was smarter than me. Mouser, my cat, was sitting on the windowsill and extremely interested in the birds outside. I whistled at him and opened the door and he jumped down and ran outside. He was too old to catch any birds, but the birds didn't know that. Maybe they'd leave.

I was more awake now and dressed myself quickly. Old Man Hibbert would be expecting me soon. Pants, shirt, jacket. Belly gun and knife. Glock in the small of my back and the brass knuckles in my pocket, and I was ready to go downstairs.

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A little about the farm: it was Old Man Hibbert's. The rest of us just lived on it. My brother brought me here when I was two. He was twelve. I don't remember it; I'm twenty now and all of my memories are on the farm. My first real memory is Old Man Hibbert taking care of my cat. I might have been four or so.

Our parents had been killed by bandits out near Martinsburg, and we almost starved to death before we got here. We weren't the only ones; there are a lot of people living here that owe their lives to the old man. Others were born here. It's a little village of a farm, with a couple of hundred people over ten or twelve square miles of woods, cropland, and greenhouses. Raib calls it a little piece of civilization in an otherwise uncharted wilderness, but that's the way he likes to talk.

Across the woods to the Southwest is Fulton, the only town of any size for miles. The old man has some men staked out to protect the library there.

There are a few other little villages nearby that we're friendly with, some individual families living in the bush, and King Leo's spread to the North. We're pretty much self-sufficient, and if we can't build it or grow it, we can trade for it in Fulton. Old Man Hibbert says he picked out this place very, very carefully, back before things went south. He likes to say he didn't do too bad for somebody his age. It's not ancient Sumer, like where he grew up, but it'll do. The old man likes to make jokes like that. They're irritating, but, after a while, you can ignore them.

Raib sat up and stared at me blankly. "Ask him how old he really is."

"Beg pardon?" I turned back from the door.

"Something King Leo's men said last night. I want to know. How long ago was Sumer, anyway?" Then he rolled over, back to sleep.

I shrugged. My brother got, well, notions sometimes.

I realized I was late when I passed the kitchen, so I grabbed some cheese and choked it down on the way to the kennels. That's where Old Man Hibbert spent the early part of every morning, working with the dogs.

I came to the edge of the main courtyard and stopped. He was wearing nothing but shorts and a shirt, buried five- or six-deep in dogs. There were perhaps twenty dogs total, the idle ones sitting at attention, watching him intently. Every last one of those animals had already placed, identified, and dismissed me before I turned the corner. I stayed put out of the way. I didn't want to distract them. I'd seen once what one of Old Man Hibbert's hundred-eighty-pound dogs could do to a man.

He finished playing with that batch and sent them back to the line, then played with the next batch, and so on, until he was done letting them all know they were loved. Then he put them through their paces. Today, he was working on hunting exercises. The old man used odd words in different languages, whistles, and hand signs, to control the dogs. We could all put them through normal commands: sit, stay, and the like. But only Hibbert and the handlers used the specialty commands. Some commands were known only to the old man and nobody knew what they were. For my part, I'd be just as happy to never know, since, as I'd said before, I'd seen what they could do.

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I watched him, and watched the courtyard. My job's a combination of bodyguard and adjutant. I'm called the *izquierda*. It's Spanish for "left," short for "left hand," I think. There's almost always been an izquierda with Old Man Hibbert, ever since he started this place several generations back. The first izquierda came from a Spanish family, a woman by the name of Ranquiz, and I suppose the name stuck.

Right now, I just stood with my hand on my gun and waited for him to finish. Being Old Man Hibbert's bodyguard is kind of like protecting a shark; you wonder why it's necessary since his teeth are so much bigger than yours. Still, it's a job, it's what he wants, and, as old as he is, he knows more than I do.

Finally, he finished and lined up the dogs. They stood unmoving for perhaps a minute as he brought over the handlers and gave them instruction: Put Ansermet in with Suisse, he's getting tired of being with Murdock. Take Murdock and put him with Elijah and put Van Der Waals by herself: she's coming into heat next week. Then he gestured and they walked off toward the kennel with the handlers. He watched them intently but gestured for me to join him.

"How do you know what's going on with them?" I asked.

One of them, a copper-colored bitch, glanced at him as she passed.

Instantly, he called out. "Bruno? Come here, girl."

She broke ranks and came over, dancing with excitement. I actually liked Bruno a great deal. She grinned up at me and slobbered over my pant leg. I grinned back and scratched her ears. Bruno had the kind of personality that, if she were human, she'd always want to have the last word and her charm would make you like it.

"Good girl," he said softly, petting her. "I know dogs, Lem. That's all. What's on schedule today?"

"You tell me, sir."

It's funny, Old Man Hibbert only comes up to my shoulders. He's as thin as a knife, and even the dogs outweigh him by fifty pounds. But he's always in charge. He has this *authority* that people react to without thinking. If he suggested we pick up toothpicks and take out after a wolf, I bet we'd be halfway out of the compound before we had second thoughts.

"Reading class this afternoon, of course," he said musingly. "Fancy a walk with me, Lem?" Then, he gave me an odd tender look.

The look flustered me. I didn't know what it meant and I felt embarrassed without knowing why. Then, I realized what he'd said. I smiled thinly and said yes but inside I was swearing. A walk. That meant somewhere, just him and me, with me going cross-eyed every minute watching out for him.

He smiled back at me and I knew, instantly, that he had seen every curse, thought, and irritation as clearly as if I had spoken them aloud. It was ludicrous to be so transparent, and I found myself laughing. He chuckled with me and patted me on the shoulder. I felt as proud as if I'd done something clever.

As we walked out of the courtyard, he stopped at the sundial. He moved the stones a bit and turned to me: "What's the date?"

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I knew the date: April 5, 2260. You could tell that much by the way the stones were set down. But that's not what he wanted. He wanted me to *read* that date in the way he'd arranged the stones into letters and numbers. I tried, like I do every time he does this. I could make out the numbers. I could even see the letters a little bit. But just when they started to go together everything fuzzed out and all I could see were bars and shapes. I had faith that Old Man Hibbert wasn't lying to me; that there really *were* words there. But I'd never been able to see them.

It's like this: in the back time, a hundred and fifty years ago, a bunch of idiots released a plague that made everybody unable to read. For some reason or another, it didn't die down like a plague should have, and people *still* can't read. That's as much as I know about it. Here in modern times, Old Man Hibbert can still read, even if the rest of us can't. Of course, he's different in a lot of ways. As long as he's been here, he's been trying to teach people to read. He just keeps at it, trying different ways, even though it never works.

"I can't read it, sir."

He shrugged and smiled at me. "Have to keep trying, eh? Maybe the kids will have more luck this afternoon. Let's get on with it." He turned to Bruno and whistled a flat sound, she heeled next to him, and we left the compound.

The walk turned out to be over the north trail to King Leo's farm. This wasn't much to my liking, since Leo didn't exactly have our best interests at heart. He had his own problems, even though he was born here in the compound. But what can you do? The old man goes where he wants to go. He was wearing a small backpack, and that made me wonder how long we were going to be gone.

I had not seen Leo in three years. Not closely, anyway. I mean, both the old man and King Leo hold a harvest festival together in the fall every year. It was good politics, I expect, to tie the two farms together.

But the only time I'd ever really seen him, up close and personal, was when he came over to help with the search for the Kingdom City Man.

We never caught him. We never even saw him. The Kingdom City Man started by stopping girls in the forest and snatching something from them. A blue sash from one girl, a pair of gloves from another. He was so quick and chose so carefully, the girls could never identify him. Pretty soon, nobody was going out in the woods at all unless they were in three's or four's, or were all men. Nothing happened for a week or two.

Then, one night, he came out of the woods and took Essie Fleming from right under our noses. Over a week, we trailed him for miles, and he danced us around and we lost him, time and again. Then, somebody would find a piece of cloth or a shoe or a lock of hair, placed carefully so that it would be found, and the whole thing would commence again.

Two weeks after he took her, they found Essie, dead. Maybe raped, too, for all I knew, but Essie's family wouldn't talk about it and I never had the heart to ask anybody. She had been cut up after she'd died, and was missing the red hat she'd had when she'd been taken.

Leo had come over, grim and tall, dark as a new moon, and with hands

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the size of dinner plates. He looked like he'd throttle the murderer himself if he could catch him. It was the only time I'd ever seen Old Man Hibbert angry, either. Leo was mad that anybody would do this to his people or him. But Hibbert blamed himself for everything.

It wasn't like Essie was a part of his family. He had no family. I'd heard enough stories by that point. How he'd outlived any family he might have had, how he'd foreseen what was going to happen and built a homestead and then protected everybody like they were his own. But these were just stories. To me, that night, he was still the nice old man who had cured my cat. I was sixteen by then but to me that was the thing about him that meant the most.

Watching them work together, leading the search parties, following tracks that disappeared into thin air, was like watching a sword work with a knife. It was then I decided that I wanted to work for Hibbert, personally. Maybe Raib did, too, since it was in that bad time that he joined up with Hibbert's guard. I didn't plan to be *izquierda*; it just turned out that way.

The north trail goes along Richland Creek for a ways, then over the bluff. We talked some on the way. He asked about my brother. I talked about him. We talked about the goings-on of the farm, too, how it had seemed it might be too wet for spring plowing, but that the recent dry weather had been a blessing, and how Johnson had heard what he thought might be wild dogs or wolves. Then, we reached the bluff. It's a high point, and we could see East down into the old man's compound and north toward King Leo's place. The old man stopped and looked around, so I did, too. The sweet breeze came up from the woods and the stream. The early smell of spring rot had gone and been replaced by the new scent of growing leaves and buds. In a week or so, the first wildflowers would spill up and over the banks of the creek.

I liked looking at the compound. You could see the house, the barn and meeting house, and the greenhouses, laid out clean and straight, and, behind them, the goat pens and the fields. I could see Larry hitching up a couple of horses. That meant that he was getting ready to plow. I shook my head and wished he could hold off for another couple of weeks. It just gave the birds outside my window another excuse to stay.

King Leo's place was laid out differently. He had more people living there, and the fields were bigger. But everything was packed tighter together, less like a home and more like a camp.

"He's building an army," said the old man.

"An army?"

"Oh, he's got a lot of families and children. Just like we do." He pointed at two long buildings. "Those are barracks. Communal dwellings for single men. Leo must be forty by now." Hibbert shook his head. "He's going to be difficult one of these days."

"He grew up in the compound," I said. "Will he be trouble? Is he going to attack us?"

"He was born here." Hibbert nodded. "I remember the night. He was the *izquierda* before you were. I didn't have another one for years until you came along." He smiled and clapped me on the shoulder. "I helped set him

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up over there. No one else wanted that spot of land, but he made it happen. A man can do a lot with just force of will. But things are different now." He pointed past Leo's place to the Northwest. "Up that way is the Emperor of Mexico. I've never met him, but I've heard tales." He pointed northeast. "About forty miles up that way is Hannibal, and I *do* know him." Hibbert fell silent. "Well, let's just say that Leo has reasons to build an army. One of these days, he's going to want my help."

"What'll you do then?"

Hibbert shrugged. "Decide whether or not to help him." Then, he gave me another look that I didn't understand; as if he were trying to tell me something.

A little ways before the border guards, Hibbert made a complex hand motion and said something guttural. It could have been in some kind of language; it could have been just a sound. I had no idea. But Bruno dropped low and took off like a silent gunshot into the brush.

We came through the trees, and two of Leo's guards were watching us. One of them held a crossbow on us. I don't know what Raib saw in them. They looked oversized and hungry, like the best news they could get all day would be a fight. I left the exposed holster at my hip alone. Wouldn't do to let them see me interested in that. Instead, I eased the one on my back and held my arms away from my side. It wasn't much comfort against a crossbow. The tree behind me would be wearing my kidneys before I ever got the gun out.

Hibbert gave them a big smile. "Gentlemen. I'm Sidney Hibbert. I've come to see Leo."

"Hear that, Kevin?" said the big one holding the crossbow. "Old Man Hibbert's come to see the King. Should we let him in?"

"Come on, Joey," said Kevin. "We could get in trouble."

"Might be a good idea to listen to your friend, son," Hibbert said, holding his hands up and palm out. "I'd surely hate to see something happen to you." He didn't take his eyes off the man's hands.

"I bet," said Joey, licking his lips. These were the moments I had nightmares about.

Old Man Hibbert clinched his hands like they were tired, and smiled apologetically. Then, nearly two hundred pounds of dog flesh leaped silently from the brush and caught Joey's hands as easily as playing dominoes. The crossbow sang and I heard a solid sound behind me. I went down and rolled like Hibbert had taught me and came up with my gun out and trained on the two of them. I was surprised to find myself trembling and enraged. I swear if either of them had said a word, I would have killed them.

Then, I felt Hibbert's hand on my shoulder. "It's all right, Lem. I'm unhurt."

I drew a deep breath. "Yeah," I whispered.

Bruno had Joey on the ground, both arms in her mouth. She saw me to one side and wagged her tail. Joey tried to pull his arms free but Bruno growled and tightened her jaw. I saw a thin trickle of blood coming down Joey's wrist.

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Hibbert picked up Joey's crossbow and took Kevin's. "Bruno, let the nice man up." Bruno let Joey go and backed up next to Hibbert. "Gentlemen, you can stay here with Bruno for a moment. Lem and I can find our own way."

He motioned me to holster my weapon—which I did unwillingly—and follow him. "Keep your back to them."

I followed him. "Sir. At least let me have my gun."

"No, Lem. This is important. Besides," he looked at me with a faint smile. "You don't think Bruno can take care of herself?"

It dawned on me, then. "You staged that."

"I took advantage of available material. Joey is one of a handful of people that thinks Leo should turn on us. Now, he's lost credibility."

"You've got spies in here? Did you wait until Joey was on guard today?"

"Of course not. I've never met the boy."

"Then, how did you know?"

He gave me that knowing look again, sad and thoughtful. "I know people, Lemuel. That's all."

At the foot of the gate to Leo's compound, Hibbert whistled. Seconds later, Bruno joined us, and we entered.

Leo looked older. His hair had gone gray in the last year, and it brought out the dark of his eyes and the sharpness of his cheekbones. He was standing next to a table, half-leaning on it, half-sitting. He looked up as we entered.

"Ah, Sid," he said sarcastically. "I should have expected you to show up. Good intuition, no doubt."

"It seemed time for me to come over and see you," Hibbert said neutrally.

Leo nodded. "Close the door."

I closed it. Leo sat in a chair slumped over. "Anybody talk to you coming in?"

"Kevin and Joey. The two guards. Joey and I had a disagreement."

Leo chuckled and rubbed his face. "I bet you did. I'm sure you made him look good."

"What's going on, Leo?"

"A sixteen year old girl was discovered dead in her room just last night. Looks like she was dragged to her bed—there was blood on the window and in a path. The path, of course, disappeared a hundred yards away. The girl had last been seen with a bright red scarf. The scarf was missing when we found the body." He looked up at Hibbert. "He's back, Sid. The Kingdom City Man is back."

I felt cold. I remembered the horror of those few weeks, going to bed not knowing who might be taken that night and finding only a reprieve the next day when we did head counts.

Leo leaned back against the table. He held his hands in the air. "I don't know what to do. Should we bring everybody inside the walls? It's spring. If we don't plow and plant, we don't eat next winter." He pointed at Hibbert sharply. "Not all of us have a twenty year food store."

Hibbert nodded distractedly. "No. Can you keep it quiet for a couple of days? I want to look into some things."

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"Right." Leo sounded disgusted. "Don't trust him, boy. The only thing on his mind is to keep on living."

"I'll be back, Leo," said Hibbert, ignoring him. "Come on, Lem."

We went back the way we had come. Kevin and Joey were gone, replaced by two hulking and sullen men. I got the feeling they didn't much care who we were as long as we didn't bother them, and I was keen on not bothering them.

Back in the woods, the old man just walked silently, clearly angry. He stopped on the top of the bluff, looking around tiredly. Then, he sat down on the ledge.

"Shit," he said. "Just shit."

"Sir?" I was surprised. The old man didn't usually talk that way.

The old man looked up at me and shook his head. "Just an old man talking. Sumer was never like this." He dropped his gaze and rubbed his neck.

In the silence, I thought about the meeting between Leo and Hibbert. I remembered Leo saying the only thing on the old man's mind was to keep on living. It made me remember Raib's question.

"Sir? When was Sumer, anyway?"

"A long time ago."

"How long?"

He looked up at me again. This time his eyes were cold and wary. "Why do you want to know?"

I looked away and stammered. "I'm sorry. I was just curious. My brother—"

"Ah," he said quietly. "Raib wanted to know, eh?"

"I'm curious, too. I just never thought of it until he asked me."

He nodded. "2100BC," he said distractedly.

"Beg pardon?"

He stood up. "2100 BC. 'Bc' means 'before Christ.' Remember the date? April 5, 2260. And 2260 is 2260 AD, which means after Christ but only looks absurd to me since I'm the only one anymore that can read the letters. The sum of 2100 and 2260 is 4360, so I'm four thousand, three hundred and sixty years old." He stretched his back. "Of course, the dates are approximate; when I finally got around to going out on the digs myself, even I couldn't tell exactly what period of Sumerian culture I was born in. I remember forests and farms and cool, wet springs. The digs were in the middle of the desert." He waved his hand. "All gone. Anyway, mustn't grumble. There, does that answer Raib's question?"

I was stunned. Whatever took away our ability to read didn't take away our understanding of numbers. I knew what hundreds and thousands were. But in *years*—

"I can't imagine that," I said finally. "I can't keep it in my mind. Nothing lives that long, does it?"

The old man laughed. "Just me and a couple of bristlecone pines, last I checked." He looked at me speculatively. "Come on. I'll show you a secret."

We walked down over by Hunter's Cave. He stopped and looked around.

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I was nervous. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the old man's secrets. "Maybe you shouldn't. Maybe there's somebody around here."

Hibbert shook his head. "Look at Bruno. She would have picked up somebody quick as winking."

The idea of his age was beginning to sink in. "How long have you worked with dogs, then?"

He walked around one particularly large boulder. "Oh, I worked with animals since I was a kid. I started working with Bruno's bloodline a few years before I started this place. May close it down, soon. They're about played out."

"Played out?"

"You can only push a dog bloodline so far." He started hoisting himself up the boulder. "After that, it starts getting too inbred. I figure I'll start trading the animals out soon enough. Let them breed back into the general population of dogs. Then, in fifty or sixty years, I'll hunt them down and see what turns up."

I always knew the old man was special—after all, he had outlived everybody else. Now, I was wondering just how special he was. "Oh." I just couldn't think the way he did. "Bruno, too?"

"No." He looked at me. "No. I think I'll keep Bruno."

Inside, the cave was damp and cold. It opened into a small chamber, and then turned straight back maybe sixty or seventy feet and was lost in darkness. A frigid stream ran down the middle of the passage. The old man led me away from the entrance. The shelf of sand on either side of the stream melted away until we were walking, bent over, through the water, bare rock on all sides of us. The stream deepened and turned under a ledge as the roof rose above us. The chamber ended in an alcove with a sand floor. Hibbert walked out of the water onto the tiny beach and stood looking around in the dimness. He rummaged in his pack and pulled out a flashlight.

I was startled. Flashlights were irreplaceable and were supposed to stay inside the compound.

"Larry's going to be pissed that you have that," I said quietly.

Hibbert laughed and played the light across the roof of the chamber without answering. After a minute or two he seemed satisfied. He rummaged in his pack again.

"Take your clothes off and put this on." He tossed me a bundle of cloth and then started unbuttoning his shirt.

It was a coverall of some sort, made of a thin rubbery material. I had a bad feeling about this. "That water's cold."

"Deep, too," Hibbert said as he started pulling on his coverall. "Good thing I taught you to swim when you were a kid."

Slowly, I pulled the coverall on. It was very comfortable but it fit tightly.

"The stream dips underneath the ledge in a tight squeeze then opens into a small lake," continued Hibbert. "Come up as quick as you can and listen. There's a waterfall at the other end that will hurt you if you get caught up in it."

I zipped up the front. It was quite warm. "Why are we doing this?"

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"Don't you want to know a secret?" He grinned at me.
"I'm not sure I want to know anything quite this badly."
"Come on. It'll be fun."
With that, he jumped into the water. In a moment, he was gone.
I stared at the water. Was this some sort of test? What did he want from me? I had no idea on either count. After a long minute staring at the surface of the water, I did what I had done for years: I followed him.

The water couldn't have been much over freezing. Where the coverall protected my skin, it wasn't too bad, but my feet turned into dull, aching wood almost instantly and my head felt like cold spikes had been driven in both my ears. I could see his light shining through the opening. The opening didn't look big enough, but it was, barely. I followed the light up to the surface, and he was treading water, waiting for me.
"Hear that?" he yelled when I broke the surface.
A roar filled the air. "Yes," I yelled back.
"Spring rain. The lake is deeper than usual and so is the waterfall. Don't go toward the noise."
"Don't worry."
We swam along the wall, no light but his flashlight. It occurred to me that if he lost that flashlight, we were lost as well. Hibbert might have been able to get out of that place, but I was pretty sure I couldn't.
Then, he took a deep breath and disappeared under the water. Everything went pitch black. Not normal night black but total darkness. Like the world behind your eyeballs. Like being blinded. Like forgetting your name or your past.
"Uh oh," I said softly in the echoing darkness. There was only the muted roar at the end of the lake and the steady drip of water from the ceiling. I held my hand against the wall to make sure I didn't drift around.
Then, below me, a light. I didn't think. I dove down underwater after it.

The river had cut out the rock at the edge of the lake and made the wall where I had been clinging to an overhang. The light shone down from a hole in the rock ceiling above me. I broke water and wiped my eyes. The light came from a solitary fixture above a fairly large room. I grabbed the metal loop at the edge of the hole and pulled myself up. I rubbed my hands together and then rubbed my feet. After a minute or two, I could feel a little circulation coming back to them. I called out.
"Back here, Lem."
This part of the room was filled with tall metal cabinets. Each door was perhaps a foot across, with writing I couldn't read across the front. I followed his voice. Behind the narrow cabinets were more cabinets. These were just as tall, but with wider doors and more writing.
Behind *those* was the rock wall, studded with lights and dials.
"Sit down over there," Hibbert ordered. "I'm checking some things."
"What is this place?"
"About ten minutes from detonation if you don't shut up."
There were a couple of chairs against the wall. I shut up and sat down. He pressed some more buttons and checked the dials. Then, he relaxed.

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"That's a relief," he said and waved at the lights. "I have to come here often enough to remember how to reset the explosives, but not so often that anybody can figure out what I'm doing."

"Detonation?"

"A bomb. You wouldn't want this stuff getting into the wrong hands, would you?"

"What stuff?"

He smiled at me, and, in the stark light, his face looked like a skull's. "You should have figured that out right away." He sat next to me, swept a hand around the room. "This is what keeps Hannibal from coming down on us. It's what keeps Fulton from getting swallowed up or burned out by the Emperor of Mexico. This is what Leo hopes I'll share with him. It's my own private armory."

"Who else has been in here?"

He looked around the room. "You, me, and Leo are the only people alive who know where it is. I'm the only one who knows how to open it and disarm the bomb."

He opened one locker and pulled out a rifle and tossed it to me. It looked new. The stock was unworn and the barrel was beautifully crafted. I had never seen a new gun in my life. We have a few guns in the compound—I know, I wear a couple of them. But they're rare and they take a lot of work to keep in repair. I always knew that the old man had saved a nice little stockpile from the back time, but this was far beyond anything I could ever have imagined.

"That's a Mauser," he said quietly.

Something flashed in my mind, a horror of ravening flame and screams. Then, it was gone before I could grasp it. "Like the name of my cat?"

"Does that mean anything to you?" he asked mildly.

"Something, maybe." I looked up from the gun and around. "Did you know modern times were coming?"

He shrugged. "Not exactly. Did I know about the reading plague? No. Not at all. But I could tell that *something* was coming, and I figured to face it with all the tools I had. This is the fast cache—I can field a couple of hundred men in four hours with what's in here. All small weapons. There's the slow cache, but it takes a while to open and weeks to make it useable."

"Jesus."

He took back the rifle and cleaned it, replaced it in the cabinet. After he closed it, I heard a hiss come from the cabinet.

"I figured it was time to show this to you. Let you know that it was here. You know. Just in case. Let's go."

"Why me?" I asked as I followed him to the edge of the water.

"Oh, Lemuel. Do you know what your main talent is?"

I shook my head. "I would have guessed it was my shooting."

Hibbert nodded. "Oh, you're a mean shot. None better. You observe things closely and you take your job seriously. But your main talent is you're completely and utterly trustworthy."

He pressed some buttons by the entrance, then put his hand on my shoulder and guided me out into the water.

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* * *

Outside, in my clothes damp from the sand, the spring sun seemed warm. We walked up the hill. Bruno met us, and together we sat on down at the top of the ridge. Old Man Hibbert sat down and rummaged in his backpack and brought out a couple of sandwiches.

"Lunch," he said, and handed me one.

I chewed absently, thinking.

Hibbert gave a bit of meat to Bruno and let her lick his face. She looked as happy as if she had good sense. He petted her down until she was lying next to us, scanning the area. Richland Creek meandered below us, caught a little boost from the Hunter's Cave stream, and then meandered away from us. The limestone cliffs across from us ran straight up and down, pitted as if eaten away by insects. I listened. I could hear no one. Bruno seemed relaxed.

"You know," Hibbert said speculatively as he scratched Bruno between the ears. "We have a special arrangement with dogs. They're the only animals we've asked to voluntarily lay down their lives for us."

"Cattle give us meat," I answered. "Goats."

"Not voluntarily. We have to kill them, and they don't often want to cooperate. Dogs are different."

I watched Bruno for a minute. Every now and then, she perked up her ears and raised her head—I could tell she was sniffing the air. "Maybe they don't know any better."

Hibbert shook his head. "I saw a thirty-pound dog take on a four-hundred-pound grizzly for me once. She bought enough time to save my life. I don't know if she knew she was going to die, but she knew she was overmatched. Didn't hesitate. Ran right up his chest and grabbed his throat." He chuckled. "Didn't hurt the bear any. Just annoyed him long enough for me to take aim."

"What happened to the dog?"

"Oh." He paused, took a bite out of his sandwich. "The bear broke her back. I had to put her out of her misery."

"When was that?"

"Let's see." He thought a minute. "It was a Sharps rifle and she was some kind of beagle. Was it 1880, maybe? Or 1890? I'm not sure. Say, three hundred years or so."

"Good Lord." I put down my sandwich. "I just can't get my head around it."

"You already knew I was old."

"But I was thinking maybe just a hundred years old. Or maybe a hundred and fifty." I shook my head. "Father Patrick didn't die until he was eighty-something. So I figured you for twice that. Instead, you're . . ." I tried to add it up.

"Over fifty times that," he said mildly.

"Yeah. I mean, everything you ever grew up with is gone. Any kids you had are dead. Everybody you ever knew has died before you. Everybody you're ever going to know is going to die before you. Doesn't that hurt you? Didn't it have any effect?" I shook my head again. "I just can't figure it out."

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"Lemuel." He patted my hand. "You're trying too hard. Look at it this way. Just take my age for granted for a minute. Think about it. If you were me, who would you have to be? You'd have to learn how to get over that kind of thing. After all, by now you would have seen, what? Maybe two hundred or so human generations? A man lives at most four or five generations, so you would have seen whole generations die fifty times over. You would have to get over it. You would have to be flexible or the changes to the world would get you. You'd have to like people, or you'd have to live as a hermit. You would have to figure out *how to handle the problem*. Lots of people resent having someone around that doesn't up and die every eighty years so you'd have to do a fair amount of travel or figure some other solution. You would have to learn how to take care of yourself, since you couldn't rely on anybody to be around long enough. Most important, you'd have to know people. That would be your chief skill."

"But doesn't it make you sad?" I turned toward him. "I mean, you'd outlive your wife. Your kids—"

"I can't have any kids," he said. "Maybe it would be harder if I did."

I knew that. I'd forgotten for a moment. I'd thought of him as if he was like anyone else.

"But your wife, your friends. Me. Larry. Leo. Everybody. Doesn't it make you sad?"

He looked away down the stream a minute, then turned back to me. "Of course, it's sad. I never said it wasn't. Look," He pointed at me. "Remember the kitten you brought here with you?"

"Mouser."

He blinked for a minute. "Right. Mouser. Mouser is getting on. He must be eighteen by now. He might live a couple more years or he might pass on next week. Or Bruno here. She's young but she still can't live more than another ten or twelve years."

I nodded. "So?"

"My point is that it's part of the package to keeping a cat or a dog. You're probably going to outlive them. That's just the way it is. It's sad. You cry. But that shouldn't put you off of cats and dogs." He looked back at the boulder. "That's all."

I didn't like his answer. "So, we're like pets to you?"

"Oh, Christ." He rolled his eyes at me. "Of course not." He stopped a moment and then gave me that look again. "Let's say Raib had something wrong with him. Something that would eventually kill him so that he would die young. And you don't have it, so you know you're going to outlive him. If you knew that was part of the package, would you give up your brother?"

"No."

"Exactly." He stowed the rest of his sandwich and the bags back in his backpack. "That's how it is with me. I'm going to outlive you all. That's part of the package. Should I die? I don't think so. Should I never talk to any of you because it'll hurt too much when you go? Hardly." He stood up.

"How do you protect yourself?"

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"Beg pardon?"

"From us? Like you said, a lot of people don't like having somebody around that doesn't die."

He didn't answer for a minute. "In my experience, cultures cycle between metaphorical time and fundamentalist time."

"Huh?"

He laughed. "Metaphorical time is when people view things as examples. I come along, and say you have an oracle here that tells the future. She's like the oracle I used to know back home. Everybody understands who everybody is supposed to be. Fundamentalist time is when everybody has a fixed idea of who people are supposed to be. You can't live forever because that's reserved for God, so you must be the devil. I can come out in the open for a while when it's metaphorical time. When fundamentalist time shows up, I go to ground."

"Which is now?"

"You know who I am, don't you?"

I stood up and checked my various guns and knives. I thought for a minute. "Maybe you could breed humans. Breed them for a long lifespan —like you breed dogs."

For a moment, Hibbert looked shocked. Then, he started laughing so hard he had to lean against the cliff face. "Oh, Lemuel. That's what I love about people. You surprise me even after all this time. Quite aside from the fact that humans are much more difficult to control than dogs and don't take kindly to being told with whom they should have sex, it's not very nice."

"Did you ever try it?"

He wiped his hands on his legs. "Yes. A very long time ago. It didn't work."

"How come?"

He watched me a moment. "A long time ago, there was a chimp band in a zoo in Holland."

"Chimp?"

"A very intelligent kind of monkey. Anyway, a top male chimp runs chimp bands and controls who breeds with whom. Every night, they put the chimps in cages for the night. There was one lowly male chimp who the top chimp wouldn't let breed. But he was very attractive to the females, and at night, after the top male was put in his cage, females would run over to the lowly chimp's cage and mate through the bars." He chuckled dryly. "Humans are *much* harder to manage than chimps." He hoisted his backpack. "Let's head back."

After all I had seen, I couldn't shake the feeling we were the only two people left in the world. Then, it came to me. This was the way he saw things all the time.

When we returned to the compound, he left me, saying: "Go on and get a wagon from Larry. We're going to Fulton tonight. I need to check some things in the library. Come on back and get me after the reading class."

"Want me to take Bruno back to the kennels?"

He looked down at her and scratched her head. "No. I don't think so."

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As he turned away from me, he stopped. "Oh. Ask Raib to come along. It'll be fun." Then, he gave me that look again.

I found Raib near the kitchen. He was talking to Josella, Luis and Fran's daughter. She was a little-empty headed for my taste, but as I approached them, he seemed interested in her.

"Raib?" I called.

He smiled at her and waved me off.

I grabbed his elbow. "The boss. We have plans."

Raib sighed and said good-bye. Josella smiled and dimpled at him.

"What's up?" he said as we went outside through the kitchen back door.

"He's going into Fulton tonight and wants us to come along."

Raib stopped. "He does? Did he say why?"

"He's going to the library. Like always."

"No. I mean, why us?"

I shrugged. "I always go with him. I suppose he wants to give you a treat."

"A treat," Raib said to himself.

"Come on. It'll be fun. He said so himself."

Larry said we could take the buckboard and Henna. That was okay but only just. Henna was a patient old roan who'd seen better days. Larry was always worried that a horse might get stolen in Fulton, so he never let us take the good ones there.

"So," Raib said as he was tying his side of the harness on. "Where did you go today?"

"Over to Leo's place."

"What did you do over there?"

I shrugged. "They spoke. I watched his back. You know how it is."

"What did they say?"

I shook my head. "You know I'm not supposed to talk about that sort of thing. Don't ask."

Raib finished tying the harness. "Yeah. I know. Sorry." He started to check the fittings, since the wagon hadn't been used since last winter.

I tied my side and leaned against the wagon for a minute. "Raib? I remembered something. Something before we came here."

Raib stopped for a second, then continued. "Yeah? What?"

"I couldn't follow it. It flashed through my mind, then it disappeared. An explosion, maybe. Fire." I shook my head and looked up at him. "Does it ring any bells?"

Raib pulled a wrench from the tools on the wall and started working on the front wheel. "Nothing specific. Maybe you're remembering the banditos that killed Mom and Dad. That was a bad night. I'd put it behind me if I were you."

"I suppose." I tried to recapture it but I couldn't. It was like trying to catch dustmotes.

"What brought it on?"

"I heard the word Mauser."

"He brought in a bird this morning. After you left."

"Who?"

"Mouser."

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"Oh." For a moment, I thought Raib was joking, but then I saw he had misunderstood me. It didn't matter. I figured the memory might come to me if I didn't try to force it.

"Yeah," continued Raib. "That cat sure does like you. Funny what an animal will do when it likes someone."

Later in the afternoon, I went over to the schoolhouse to tell Old Man Hibbert we were ready for him. The schoolhouse had a waiting room with a window in it. I sat down and watched while I waited for him.

Normally, people don't drop by the schoolhouse unless the old man invites them. He's pretty particular about how he does things there. He's been doing this since the back time, but I don't know that he's made much progress.

I knew all the kids, of course. They had all been born in the compound. I'd carried water for the old man the night Isaiah Walker was born, and went to get the old man when little Dorothy was almost lost down a well. Maybe it was because I didn't see him teaching very often, but it struck me how gentle he was with these kids. He'd read to them and try to get them to say the letters. They'd repeat after him but when he held one up and asked them what it was, they'd fidget and laugh. He laughed, too, and tried something else, a different book, a drawing, having Bruno do a trick. Heck, I tried to read with them. I'd like to be able to tell the old man I could read. It wasn't any use. I couldn't tell the letters apart. And I *knew* they were letters; the old man had told me often enough. I could see the numbers without much trouble.

I reckon he must have seen me. Or maybe he felt it was time to stop. About ten minutes after I got there, he gave the kids a treat and sent them outside. He and Bruno came out a minute later.

"It takes patience, I suppose." He rubbed his eyes and looked tired. "It's better than it used to be."

"It is?"

He smiled. "Oh, yes. The generation after the plague couldn't read numbers. They had trouble counting. Some of them couldn't see a drawing on paper. Others were actually retarded. Whatever this plague is, it hits a very precise area of the brain. But, as precise as it is, there are still side effects and collateral damage. Now, we have numbers—and money—again."

I didn't like the sound of it. "'Are,' sir? Isn't the plague gone?"

"I don't know." He stepped down and stretched in the afternoon sun. "It could have been a plague that did specific damage to the human genome, and we're seeing the effects. Or, it could still be lingering around here in some reservoir and reinfecting each generation. I can't tell if we're adapting to the damage or generating resistance."

I stared at him.

He caught my gaze. "Didn't catch my drift, eh?"

"Way over my head, sir."

"Don't worry about it. The real problem is, I have no tools to find out the answers." We started walking over toward the barn. "I have no lab, nor the means to build one. Even if I did, I don't have the required skills. I'm

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just the only one who can read, and everybody who might have been able to help me is a century in the grave. And if I did learn the right skills and built the lab, I wouldn't know what I was looking for."

"Why didn't they help you when they were alive?"

He laughed dryly. "Oh, they would have. It was my mistake. I didn't understand the nature of the problem. Things happened slowly. First, it looked like a virus-induced dyslexia. Then a kind of encephalitis. Finally, big blocks of the population woke up illiterate. I thought I knew what to do. It couldn't be worse than Europe in the Dark Ages. The trick was how to be a Saracen. All I had to do was wait it out, I thought. No plague lasts forever, I thought. The important thing is to preserve what I can until people reassert themselves, I thought." He threw up his hands. "I was wrong, and by the time I realized it, most of those who could have helped me were dead. I saved who I could, but by then they were old and the labs were all destroyed. Soon, they died. I was the only one left who could read. I started the schoolhouse. I work with the kids." He shrugged. "Every generation gets a very little bit better. It's just going to take a while longer than I figured."

Raib was waiting for us at the barn.

"Good to see you, Raib," said the old man warmly and shook Raib's hand.

Raib looked startled and froze for a moment. Then, he returned the handshake.

Hibbert nodded and pointed to the back of the wagon. Bruno jumped up on the boards and laid down, panting. The old man put his backpack next to her. We got on the buckboard of the wagon and Raib flicked the reigns.

"Take the north road first," said Hibbert. "Catch the Fulton road up by the Pierce house."

Raib turned to him. "That'll cost us two hours; an hour north and another hour south to make it up again. We won't get to Fulton until way after dark."

"I know." Hibbert leaned back in the buckboard and closed his eyes in the sun. "Take us by the Pierce house first."

Raib looked at me. I shrugged. The old man goes where he wants to go.

Betty Pierce and her three sons farm sheep and corn near the northeast corner of the compound.

Miss Betty had raised me after Raib had brought me here. Raib had stayed in the compound with Hibbert. This was long before she had married Frank Pierce, back when she was still helping the old man in the greenhouses. She and Frank had moved out here to North Farm and had three sons. Then, Frank died of lockjaw about eight years ago and left her alone with the boys. Larry sent over people to help her for a while, until the boys grew up. Ethan, the oldest, was close to twenty now, with the two others strung out behind him. I had always liked her. She still insisted I call her Miss Betty like I used to. She'd insisted on that, not wanting to take the place of what little I remembered of my mother. I liked Frank, too, and saw the family whenever I could.

It was Pious, the youngest, that saw us first and ducked back in the

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house to get Miss Betty. She was waiting for us as we pulled into the yard.

She shook the old man's hand and Raib's and hugged me. She turned back to Hibbert and nodded. "Thought you might be heading out this way."

The old man grinned. "I could smell the rhubarb pie all the way back to the house. Of course, I came."

She smiled briefly, but it was just to be polite. I could see that she was serious about something. "We lost two sheep and a lamb last night. To wolves."

Hibbert was instantly just as serious. "Let me see them."

Mrs. Pierce nodded. "We found only the one. Ethan. Take Mister Hibbert to the barn."

The body was lying on the straw in one of the stalls. Its throat had been slashed and its neck was broken. The wolf had worried at the body as well. One hind leg was missing and the other looked as if it had been gnawed.

"The animals have all been nervous lately," Ethan said, standing next to us. "My cousins across the draw lost a calf two weeks ago."

Hibbert examined the body, moving the head this way and that and drawing apart the flesh of the throat. Raib went outside. So would I if I'd had a choice.

Finally, the old man stood. "I'm going to Fulton tonight. When I get back, I'll see if I can do something."

Ethan nodded. We walked back to the wagon. Miss Betty was sitting on a bench next to Pious, looking through his hair.

"Where's Young Frank?" I asked.

"Out guarding the sheep," she said, not looking up from the boy's scalp. "Mister Hibbert. If I could get a bottle of kerosene from you, it'd be a blessing."

The old man nodded and I expected him to say he'd get some from Larry when he got back to the compound. Instead, he leaned into the wagon and rummaged in his pack and brought out a little bottle.

"Thought you might need some, being spring and all."

Miss Betty smiled at him, and, for a moment, she looked like a girl. "Thank you kindly." Without looking, she grabbed Pious by the wrist before he got away.

We got back in the wagon, and Raib flicked the reigns. Henna snorted, and we were back on the road. About a half-mile later, we caught up to the Fulton road and turned south. The old man leaned back in the buckboard and watched the fields.

"So, did Larry say something about the calf?" asked Raib.

"No. Not at all."

"Something about the sheep, then."

"Nope."

"How did you know to come here?"

Hibbert looked at Raib innocently. "To drop off the kerosene, of course."

I laughed. Raib grinned. "Yeah. Right. Really, how did you know?"

"Intuition, I suppose," said Hibbert thoughtfully. "That's as good a word for it as any."

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I remembered what King Leo had said, but I didn't mention it.

"And what is intuition?" Raib asked. He reminded me of Bruno playing with Hibbert.

Hibbert smiled indulgently and closed his eyes again. "Intuition is just your brain telling you the answer to a question without mentioning how it solved the problem. Now, don't bother me. I plan on exercising my intuition the rest of the way into Fulton."

It was dark by the time we reached the library.

The Fulton library was a dark and brooding old granite building with slits for windows and a big oaken gate in the front. On either side of the gate grew two ancient oak trees, now filled with spring birds roaring and screeching at one another. I groaned. It was worse than my window at home.

Four guards stood at alert on the gate. I couldn't see them, but I knew that every window had its own guard. These guards lived in the library and were supported by Old Man Hibbert. If it was a contest between the compound at home and the library, he'd choose the library in a second. As far as he was concerned, the library was *important*.

These guards were hard-eyed and big. They watched as we brought the wagon up to the gate and only relaxed when they recognized Hibbert in the buckboard. The captain nodded. "Welcome, sir," he said to the old man and motioned to the other guards to open the gate. The doors swung wide; Raib switched Henna and the wagon rolled inside.

I was always nervous in Fulton, especially now with the Kingdom City Man on the loose. There may be bigger towns in the world, but Fulton was the only such place I knew. It's one thing to look out for Hibbert in the woods or over to King Leo's. But Fulton has a five hundred people and all they do is try to separate visitors from their belongings. There've been more than a few knifings over the years. Once we entered Fulton, I wasn't going to rest easy until they closed the gates behind us when we left.

The guards lit the evening lanterns and I could see around me.

Hibbert got down off the wagon and stretched. Bruno jumped down and sat beside him. "Okay, boys," he said to us. "You two go off and find some dinner. I'll join you later. I have a little reading to do." With that, he went off with the captain and left us to our own devices.

"Well, then, little brother," Raib said, rubbing his hands together. "Since we're eating on the old man, what's your pleasure?"

There weren't many choices. We could eat at Terry's Table, an inn down Fifth Street, we could grab bread and cheese at one or another of the bars in Fulton, all of which were barely a hundred yards from where we stood, or we could dine at Susie's, the brothel. I knew exactly which place had Raib's attention. Susie's had the best food, but the place always made me uncomfortable. The walls were thin.

Raib dragged me there anyway. I didn't protest too much; Susie's was close, and I was tired. Susie Potter saw us as we came in and found us a table. She and Hibbert have been friends probably since she was a child. The place was loud. Many of the tables had families, and several children

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were running around and screaming at one another. One child at a corner table was crying inconsolably. Raib had to shout at me to make conversation. For my part, I just didn't talk.

Susie gave me a kiss on the cheek and patted Raib's bottom, then went off to find one of her girls to serve us. Two wine cups were dropped on the table and filled by a girl of maybe fifteen who had a pleasant smile and was only missing one tooth.

Raib looked around the room. "Which one do you pick?"

"Susie doesn't use the serving girls. The women are behind the curtain."

"A man can dream, can't he?" He watched hungrily as our girl came back with two bowls of stew and a loaf of bread.

Something about him reminded me of the gun in Hibbert's cache, the Mauser. The flames and screams flashed through my mind again. This time it stayed with me briefly and I could see a house, a window. I wondered if this memory was of the time when my parents had been killed and Raib had brought me here from Martinsburg. I wanted to ask about it, but a loud brothel didn't seem the place.

In a little while, though, the place emptied down to about half full. Some went through the curtains to the women, but mostly it was just the families leaving. Farming families, likely, going out for a treat and going home early to sleep for the next day. The remainder were men, drinking and waiting until they were ready to go beyond the curtain. Or just drinking for the hell of it.

Raib had already gone through three or more cups and had demanded a bottle for himself. Susie had sent one over, but had pulled the young girl in favor of an older, more seasoned woman. Her name was Lois, and she looked like she could take either one of us in a fight.

This irritated Raib. "Goddamit," he grumbled. "What? Was I so intimidating to that slip of a girl? What? Has this become a church when I wasn't looking?"

I nodded sagely, three cups to the wind myself. "It'll be fine. Lois will take care of everything."

"True, true," Raib agreed and leered at me. He patted me clumsily on my arm. "You're my brother. I love you, man. I wouldn't be here but for you."

He lost interest and turned back to his cup.

I sat up and stared at him, not so drunk after all. "What do you mean, Raib?"

He waved it away. "Doesn't matter. I'm here, all right."

"Where would you go if I wasn't here?"

Raib thought for a minute, then his expression became grave. "Had to make sure you grew up right. That's why I brought you here. Couldn't do anything for you back in Martinsburg. Nothing at all. That's why I brought you here."

"Raib?" I asked gently. "How did our parents die?"

For a moment, he was still. He stared into his cup. "In fire and flames, little brother. In fire and flames."

He wouldn't talk about it after that, but silently drank cup after cup of wine. After a while, he lurched to his feet and stumbled outside. Hibbert and Raib came back in together, arm in arm,

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"Look who I found outside," Raib said, grinning. "If I feed him can I keep him?"

Hibbert gave me that look I had started to recognize but could not interpret. Why here? I thought. Why now?

The two of them sat down. Raib leaned his head on Hibbert's shoulder. "This guy is great, Lem. You got a place with him. It was worth coming here for that."

Hibbert laughed and cradled his head, then gently pushed him until Raib was sitting up straight.

"Did you both get dinner?"

I nodded and reached for my purse to pay for the meal but Hibbert took my hand and stopped me.

"I'll cover it." He nodded toward the curtain. "Would you both like entertainment?"

Raib looked at me. For the life of me, it seemed like he was asking my approval. It made me laugh out loud. I looked around. Susie would watch Hibbert, and Raib, for all that he had drunk, could turn into a fighting fury if need be. I shook my head. Like watching out for a shark, as I said. The folly of it struck me and I laughed again. "None for me, thanks. But I think Raib would like to join you."

Hibbert smiled. "Come on, then, son. Let's enjoy the moment." He helped Raib stand. Raib collected himself and seemed almost sober.

"See you later, Lem." Then, Raib hugged me.

I wasn't surprised. Raib was a sloppy drunk, but it was well meant. I hugged him back and waved the two of them away.

The spring air was still only lightly spiced with flowers. I walked back to the library and stood on the steps with the guards. The air was cool, but I could smell the warm underbelly of summer coming toward us. I said good night to the guards and went inside to my room.

I awoke suddenly. Hibbert was sitting at the edge of my bed. It was dark, but somehow I knew that it was him.

"Are you awake, Lem?"

Something in his voice drove away all sleep. I sat up and shook my head. I pulled the Glock from under my pillow and the knife from the straw ticking of the bed. "Yes."

He shook his head and pushed down my hands. "None of that."

His voice was so sad it scared me. "What happened?" I looked at him, but I couldn't see his face.

"Raib is dead," he said.

Suddenly, the whole world couldn't breathe. Everything was filled with silence and I was looking at Hibbert's shadowy form from the end of a long tunnel. I pulled the covers off me and stood up, not knowing why. My feet made no sound when they hit the floor. I clapped my hands. Nothing.

I piled the pillows on the bed and fired the Glock through them. The roar of the pistol killed the silence, and I could hear myself breathe again.

I looked at the Glock in my hand. The knife was in my other hand. "Now, that was strange," I said.

Hibbert lit the lamp, and I could see that he had been crying. "People

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do strange things around death." He took the Glock and the knife from me and set them on the table. I was just as happy; I wanted nothing to do with death right then.

"How did it happen?"

"He went upstairs with one of the girls—"

"Which one?"

The old man smiled thinly. "Lois."

"I thought so."

"He came back down and we sat at a table drinking wine and talking. He fell asleep on the table. I kept an eye on him while I helped Susie close up. Then, when I went to bring him home, he was dead."

I felt wounded, shot in the heart and losing blood. I shook my head slowly. "So, what killed him? Did he drink too much?"

"Of course not. I was watching him. It was probably a stroke. Or maybe his heart."

"His heart?" I stared at him. "He wasn't that much older than me."

"No," said Hibbert sadly. "No. He was a young man. Still, it happens. People have strokes. People have heart attacks." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Come on. We have things to do."

I thought it was still dark out, but it was mid-morning. Raib had died in the early hours, but the old man had taken care of the body as far as he could. Now, the Fulton Sheriff had to get involved, as evil and corrupt a man as I have ever met. That meant talking to the undertaker. Putting Raib in a box. I was ready to put Raib in the buckboard wrapped in a sheet and take care of him back myself back in the compound, but that wasn't the way they did things in Fulton. No. They had to worry over him and squeeze every last coin out of the deal before they'd let us out of town. If Old Man Hibbert hadn't been with me every step of the way, I might have shot somebody out of pure impatient fury. That, and the fact he still had the Glock and the knife.

He gave them back to me as we finally loaded the unnecessary pine box onto the back of the wagon. Over us, in the trees, came the roar of the birds. Hibbert motioned Bruno to sit up front with us. It was falling dark when we finally rolled out of town.

Hibbert stopped us a few miles out of town to make a fire and dinner. He cooked very well, but I couldn't taste the food. I kept looking into the fire and remembering how Raib had looked the last time I'd seen him. He had looked happy, relaxed. Anticipating.

Bruno came around the fire and sat down next to me. Absently, I petted her. Hibbert got his pack from the wagon and came back to sit next to Bruno. Bruno lifted her head and licked my knee as if to say she was sorry, then moved over toward Hibbert and laid her head in his lap. He petted her and scratched behind her ears. She opened her mouth in a dog's grin and closed her eyes.

I had this itch to do something. Anything. But there was an absolute blank in my mind as to what it was I wanted to do. I just sat there, my hands shaking. My brother's body is in the wagon, I thought. And all I can do is sit here next to the fire and shake.

"It was a spring night like this when Raib brought you into my house,"

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said Hibbert suddenly in the silence. He pulled a spike brush out of his pack and began stroking Bruno. "You were maybe two. He was about twelve. Frank Pierce brought him in. Frank had found Raib on the Fulton road, not far from here. Raib was looking for me. Said he'd heard I was a good man to bring a child to."

Hibbert patted Bruno's flank. "I guess I was, eh girl? Raib thought so, anyway. He was standing there in my doorway, smelling of smoke and burnt lead. You were asleep against his shoulder. He had his rifle over his shoulder and your cat in a bag—Mauser was a little kitten then. One of his arms was bleeding from a dozen small wounds."

"Mauser?" He had spoken the word differently. More like the gun.

Hibbert nodded. "Raib carried him because he was yours. You named the kitten after Raib's gun. That was the first word I ever heard you say. Raib didn't want to stay, but I persuaded him that you needed your older brother. Maybe that was a mistake."

I felt unsteady. "He didn't want to stay?"

Hibbert didn't say anything for a moment. I could see the fire reflect from the back of the brush as he ran it down Bruno's flank. Each time he drew the brush down her side, it quivered a little. "Hannibal's real name is Albert Schricter. He got the name Hannibal from the town where he first started his army. Albert Schricter's a disgusting little man with nasty habits who would like to be the next Alexander the Great."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Hannibal likes to abduct children about six or seven and turn them into soldiers. Then, he gives them guns, picks a direction and turns them loose. Hannibal runs things north to Warsaw, south to Martinsburg, west to Hunnewell and east to Meredosia. He rules with an iron hand and an army of children. Younger children apparently are just trained to be killers. The raping and torture are left to the older ones. When the children grow up, they become his lieutenants."

I felt stunned. "Raib was with Hannibal?"

Hibbert nodded. "He'd been abducted. He didn't remember anything about where he was from until the night he and his band killed your parents. From what he told me, it was your mother that persuaded him to bring you to me."

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"He wanted to go back to that?"

The old man sighed. "Home is where you're taught to think it is. That was all he knew. But for whatever reason—guilt, love, genetic familiarity—he took a liking to you. You must have smelled right. That's why he stayed and made things work as long as he could."

I held my hands together. It had gotten cold. I looked down and saw the tendons straining in my hands and wrists and made myself relax. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I wanted you to know that your brother loved you."

I nodded.

In the distance, I heard an owl, followed by another. Then, beyond them, a coyote.

"Maybe we'd best go on." I looked up at the clear night sky. The moon was rising. "I don't want to tempt Miss Betty's wolves."

Hibbert finished brushing Bruno and put the brush back in his pack. His movement half woke Bruno from her firelight doze. Her tail thumped the ground slowly. Her great head was utterly languid in the old man's lap. He began scratching and rubbing behind her ears.

"Oh," he crooned to Bruno. "It was no wolf."

I shivered at the sound.

"No, no, no," he said gently. Bruno smiled at her master's voice and wagged her tail. "She tries to be a good girl. She really tries. But she found a way out of the kennels." He hugged her and Bruno licked his face. "She knows what she's supposed to do, but she just can't keep to it. Can she, now?" Bruno barked happily. "Oh, I love her. I do." He quieted her again by massaging her head, her ears. She leaned back against him, completely happy.

He did something with his hands, a gentle tug, and she sagged, still smiling, to the ground. The long sigh of her last exhale hung in the air.

"She tried," he said sadly. "She really tried."

At that moment, I saw Raib and Hibbert talking across the table at Susie's, Raib happy, sad, crying at some long forgotten shame, asking for absolution. Then, happy in forgiveness and satiation, he leans his head upon the table and Hibbert strokes him, murmuring and comforting him. Then, the old man does something with his hands, a gentle tug, and Raib sees maybe a flash of light and darkness, smiling, never knowing what's been done to him.

"You killed him. You killed my brother." The Glock was in my hand, safety off and cocked, without me ever thinking of it.

The old man eased Bruno's head to the ground and looked up at me with that look I had seen all day. Only now I recognized it. It was sadness and regret at something he was going to do.

"Yes, Lem." He said in a quiet voice. "Yes, I did. Maybe I should have done it years ago, after Essie Fleming died."

"Raib was the Kingdom City Man?"

Hibbert nodded. "I knew it was one of my people. I'd figured it was Raib soon enough. I should have sent Raib back the night he wanted to go, after he brought you to me. I should have dealt with him when I knew what he was. But I thought I could divert him or heal him. I thought I had.

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Some wounds don't heal." He shook his head and stood up. "I don't make many mistakes like that, but with Raib, I made one mistake after another all the way down the line. I thought I could avoid the risk. I was wrong, and two girls died."

I still held the gun on him. One pull, and I could bring an end to him. "You could have let him go." I realized that I was crying.

He shook his head. "Would you rather Raib had been killed by strangers? Tortured? Hung? Best I do it. Who else do you think he would have wanted to put him down?" He looked down the barrel of the Glock. "If you're going to try to kill me, now's the time."

He stared back at me without flinching. I uncocked the Glock and put the safety on. My hands were strangely steady when I replaced it in the holster.

"I trusted you," I said bitterly.

"You trusted me to do the right thing," he answered. "I need someone like you to trust me. But I can't always make you happy."

I didn't answer. My brother, I thought. My brother, the Kingdom City Man. My brother, one of Hannibal's killers. "Why did he kill Leo's girl? Why now?"

"Bad luck, I think," Hibbert said. "Raib had developed an attachment to a girl in Leo's camp. Her name was Cheyenne. She was pretty, vain, and fickle and when, after playing with Raib, she let him go, he tried to convince her to stay with him, but lost his temper and she was dead. It's my fault. She didn't deserve to die."

"To hell with it." I stamped out the fire and threw the cookware and other things into the back of the wagon, taking care not to hit my brother. When I was done, I got up on the buckboard and looked down at Hibbert. "I'm heading home. Are you coming along?"

"Help me with Bruno."

Swearing, I got back down off the buckboard, and, between the two of us, we piled the dog on the cookware. Then, in silence, I drove the wagon back to the compound.

Hibbert got off the wagon near the barn and got a cart for Bruno. He took Bruno with him into the dark. I didn't know if I still wanted to be here any more.

I went upstairs to our room and stood there. Mouser was on the sill waiting for me. I petted him. Then, I went through Raib's drawers. In the third drawer down, I found a red scarf, a blue sash, and a red hat next to a bottle of wine. I never found the gloves.

I sat on the floor and drank the bottle of wine, turning the sash and hat over and over, trying to make sense of my brother. Eventually, I passed out.

In the morning, I woke with the sun. I felt wretched. The room was foul from me being sick in my sleep. Raib was still dead. I stumbled to the window, opened it, and absently petted Mouser. The fresh air felt good on my face. Something felt wrong. Something was missing. It took me a long time to figure out what it was.

The birds were gone. O

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INSTRUCTIONS TO THE ADVANCE SCOUTS

To blend in at the mall, dress
casual, and always use credit cards.

If you need free transportation,
call a cab, and mind-probe the driver.

Avoid night clubs with strobe lights,
as their pulsations subvert our cloaking.

Do not partake of alcoholic liquids,
for they can trigger the egg laying cycle.

Do not befriend Earthlings, male or female,
as it will only confuse your appetite later on.

Stay away from Felis domesticus, for it
"knows us," and will surely sound the alarm.

Communicate through the standard means;
phone booth, airport terminal, two-way bead.

Finally, remember to always walk like
a human, but think like an alien.

—G. O. Clark

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Patchwork Captain and the Mad Senator

Although he had published two novels prior to *Evolution's Darling* (1999), it was the nomination of the latter for a Philip K. Dick Award that truly brought Scott Westerfeld to the attention of SF readers. That precisely machined transhuman tale of art, sex, and salvation in the spaceways launched Westerfeld into the first ranks of those practitioners of the postmodern space opera, a category begun by Samuel Delany with his *Nova* (1968), the template for all who came after. Following up properly on such a well-crafted, ingenious book plainly required time, but now, with the publication of *The Risen Empire: Book One of Succession* (Tor, hardcover, $24.95, 304 pages, ISBN 0-765-30555-0), Westerfeld proves that he is more than capable of outdoing himself.

Far in the future, eighty worlds are ruled by the undead Emperor and his immortal juvenile sister, the Child Empress. The immortal pair have governed for sixteen hundred years, transforming their tightly clustered dominion into a hierarchical realm of wealth and achievement. (Travel between stars occurs only at lightspeed, introducing the usual relativistic quandaries, but, paradoxically enough, communication is instantaneous, thanks to quantum-entangled devices.) But now the Empire is stagnating a bit, just when it faces its biggest threat, the Rix. The Rix are a group of free-roaming humans dedicating to seeding worlds with compound minds, independent AI's that take over planetary infrastructures. A Rix attack on Legis XV has also entailed the abduction of the Child Empress. The only military starship commander in the vicinity, Captain Laurent Zai, is tasked with rescuing the ageless royal girl. Failure offers only an honorable suicide as an option. Meanwhile, back at the center of the Empire, Zai's lover, Senator Nara Oxham, is struggling to reconcile her mildly anti-Imperial political stance with the outbreak of war with the Rix, and with alliance overtures from the Emperor himself. The course of the novel will find both Laurent and Nara forced to do what they least expect of themselves. Be warned, however, that the cliffhanger ending will leave you pining for the second book.

Westerfeld's achievements here are numerous. He creates a unique stellar polity that is, all at once, mysterious, exotic and plausible, folding tastes of Frank Herbert's and Isaac Asimov's space opera classics into the mix, as well as a bit of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959). His love story between the damaged souls of Nara and Laurent—the former driven mad in her youth by her unchecked empathetic abilities; the latter literally disassembled as a POW—is outstanding. And his portrayals of

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Alexander the compound mind and Herd, the Rix soldier, reveal a fine grasp of alien sensibilities.

But Westerfeld's main artistic triumph is to create a turbocharged prose that turns his descriptions of physical events into poetry. Reading this book is like mainlining Jack Kirby via a Stephen Hawking needle. Whether describing the launching of a kind of super bullet or the manner in which a house is grown amidst a polar wilderness or the telemetric piloting of a nanocopter, Westerfeld marshals the forces of technology and physics and biology into a veritable word-ballet. Hypnotic, thrilling, propulsive, this narrative proves that any SF that concerns itself with human emotions, as well as with the calculus of forces, can sustain real literature fully as impactful as mainstream fictions, but utterly different in tone and effect.

Superb Flash Tales

Like all of us gathered here today, I'm small-minded enough to occasionally be jealous of intrusion from "outsiders" into the SF genre. How dare these "mainstream" writers try to re-invent the rocketship and show multi-tentacled Grandma how to suck smerp eggs? But on the other hand, like most of my compatriots, I like to think I'm big-minded enough to offer congratulations when someone from outside the pale does a fine job using our materials. Such is the case with Matthew Derby's *Super Flat Times* (Back Bay Books, trade paper, $13.95, 196 pages, ISBN 0-316-73857-3). This collection of nearly twenty linked stories, portraying a mordantly dystopic future, is sophisticated and genuinely speculative, sincerely touching and thought-provoking.

The frame tale for the volume concerns a survivor of the "Super Flat Times," an interval lasting some sixty years in the future of an unnamed country (why not even America?) when bizarre societal strictures were enforced on a hapless population, *à la* the Cambodian Year Zero. This female survivor, named Mi Jin Ahn-Strauss, is going to bear witness to the tragic era by presenting us with the victims' own stories, rescued by technological means from the weird charnel grounds where the corpses are entombed. With this narrative apparatus in place, we're off for a wild ride.

"The Sound Gun" follows a troop of future soldiers lugging through the wilderness the massive weapon of their own undoing. That the grunts are ordered to maintain their newspeak "Wish Journals" as psychological buttressing only adds to their burdens. With the diet during Super Flat Times consisting of meat, meat, and more meat, it's not odd that a boy named Philip finds himself fixated on the "Meat Tower"—to his undoing. "The Father Helmet" finds another youngster, yearning for his dead parent, suddenly presented with the ability to remake the past. And "The End of Men" reveals just how deadly a kind of Society-for-Creative-Anachronism-style recreation of the past can become. Many of these stories explicitly or implicitly examine the Orwellian theme of the authoritarian imposition of approved false feelings, the limiting of suitable responses to life's prospects, both sad and happy.

Derby exhibits an easy familiarity with SF's tactics and tropes.

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(One story, "Home Recordings," strikes me as a deliberate homage to Ballard's "The Sound-Sweep.") He offers up such striking images as women engineered with "uterine flaps" that can be "unbuttoned" by authorities in search of their ova. He maintains a droll tone that abets rather than undercuts the tragedy of his dystopia. And he conceives characters and situations that immediately engage our attention, while walking a fine balance between experimentalism and linear narrative. In a just world, it would not surprise me to see this excellent book winding up as a PKD Award finalist.

If you enjoy the work of Carol Emshwiller or Jack Womack, David Bunch or Robert Sheckley, George Saunders or Steve Aylett (the latter pair being two other non-genre-born whizzes), then you owe it to yourself to pick up Derby's debut.

Prodigal Son of *Galaxy* Magazine

On page 115 of *Jennifer Government* (Doubleday, hardcover, $19.95, 321 pages, ISBN 0-385-50759-3), author Max Barry explicitly references *The Space Merchants*, that 1953 classic by Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth about an age when advertisers ruled the earth. Barry's citation is both reverential and the tossing-down of a gauntlet. For while he admits that the earlier book remains mildly prophetic and hip to the forces shaping postmodern life, he also denies that its vision went far enough. And *Jennifer Government* is Barry's case for his own vision being superior. Chutzpah aside, Barry just might be right. His novel is that good and convincing in its *reductio ad absurdum*.

At some indefinite point in the future (perhaps one hundred years ahead, judging by a clue or two), the majority of the nations of the globe have been subsumed by America and our credo of "consumerizm." Unregulated corporations now enjoy pretty much free rein in their avaricious dealings with the public and each other, with the Government being reduced to just another player—and not the biggest or most respected player at that. People adopt as their surnames the brand of the company they work for, while military force is substituted for by armed organizations such as the Police and the NRA. Only the European Union and an Asian Bloc stand in contrast to the USA (with Africa and the Middle East fulfilling the role of "developing markets").

This scenario has resulted in mindless peace and prosperity for most US citizens, at the cost of rat-race work habits and conformist behavior. (And here's one of Barry's upgrades to the Pohl-Kornbluth vision: his dystopia is velvet-lined, not that bad a place at all, and the reactions of his characters to it are ambivalent.) But one man, the cruel executive named John Nike, headquartered in the Australian part of America, is about to precipitate a crisis by his daring marketing scheme. To boost demand for Nike's newest sneakers, John orders a lowly and hapless employee named Hack Nike to commit a few random murders of Nike's customers, aiming to spark a media blitz that Nike's shoes are popular enough to die for. But John does

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not reckon with the persistence of a federal agent named Jennifer Government, who has a personal grudge against the Nike exec. Over the next few weeks following the murders, Jennifer will strive to untangle the threads leading back to John Nike, while a half-dozen other characters such as inept assassin Billy NRA and suicidal stockbroker Buy Mitsui complicate her life.

Barry takes his hyperbolic premise and milks it for all it's worth. Ambulance services demand credit-card info over the phone prior to dispatch. Private freeways charge by the mile. Burger chains rumble against their competitors. And all the characters accept their insane world just as unthinkingly as we accept ours. And what characters! Full of zip and brio, especially the kick-ass Jennifer, they whiz through this story like bright icons who also have surprising depths. The romance between Jennifer and Buy, for instance, offers a fair amount of pathos.

But the dominant tone of this satisfyingly recomplicated tale is humorous and savage. Barry writes great comic dialogue and crisp descriptions. When Hack finds out that his girlfriend Violet has not perished, but merely deserted him, he thinks, "Violet . . . was neither as affectionate nor as dead as he'd believed." This kind of wry, deadpan prose, combined with a roller coaster plot, makes *Jennifer Government* eminently readable, the barbs of its message being swaddled in the lushness of its narration.

One of the funniest and most cutting recent novels with a mildly stefnal edge to it was Kurt Andersen's *Turn of the Century* (1999). *Jennifer Government* is just as funny, just as satirical, and more purely science-fictional. Max Barry should make Fred Pohl and the ghost of Kornbluth proud.

Scholz, a Middle-Aged Master

Hard on the heels of his disturbingly good novel *Radiance* (2002), Carter Scholz delivers an equally strong short-story collection, *The Amount to Carry* (Picador, hardcover, $23.00, 208 pages, ISBN 0-312-26901-3). Together, this is more Scholz than we've had in the past two decades, and a cause for celebration.

Scholz's brand of speculative literature owes more to Borges and Kafka than to Heinlein and Clarke. Kafka, for instance, is an actual character in the title story, which finds the Prague author meeting poet Wallace Stevens and composer Charles Ives on an alternate timetrack. And Scholz employs the fabulism of these non-genre predecessors to good effect in such tales as "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor," in which the seductive power of furniture unhinges a solitary man, and in "At the Shore," which finds a man wandering through the coils of an infinite house.

Yet Scholz also draws strengths from the matter and means and marvels of pure SF, and deals with such material affectionately and intelligently. The house in "At the Shore" is on some level also a starship, inhabited by a lone mad voyager in the manner of Moorcock's *The Black Corridor* (1969). "Invisible Ink" is cousin to Theodore Sturgeon's "To Here and Easel" in its portrait of a creator's stream of consciousness. In "Altamira," a timeslip incident carries an art

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critic back to the Renaissance, where he finds himself becoming the protégé of the artist he once studied at centuries' remove. In "The Nine Billion Names of God," Scholz deconstructs and rebuilds the famous Clarke story of the same name for comic effect. And in "A Catastrophe Machine," where the branch of mathematics known as catastrophe theory assumes a leading role, and in "The Menagerie of Babel," where the hidden implications of Darwinism erupt, Scholz hews firmly to the classic definition of SF as "a fiction which would fall apart should the science be removed."

Scholz's characters all tend to be trapped by the systems they inhabit. Yet they never cease to seek to break free. In "The Eve of the Last Apollo," the picture of despairing astronaut John Andrews, abandoned by NASA and deprived of his dreams, seems an absolute dead-end. And yet the story's closing scene with Andrews's son opens out the prospects without sugar-coating the father's despair. This is the kind of beautiful tightrope-walking act that Scholz's stories all perform.

The Guy Who Cried Monster

Jim Knipfel's first two books—*Slackjaw* (1999) and *Quitting the Nairobi Trio* (2000)—were outrageous yet straight-faced memoirs of his childhood and young adulthood as a quintessential rebel slacker. Involving substance abuse, punk rock, crummy jobs, madness, blindness, subversive behavior, and a love of pop culture detritus, they came with endorsements from none other than Thomas Pynchon—testament to the high quality of their prose and innate allure and impact. Scattered throughout these volumes were several references to SF: *Lost in Space*, Lovecraft, Wells. Reading between the lines, one could place a pretty safe bet that Knipfel had ingested more than his share of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. With the publication of his third book, a novel titled *The Buzzing* (Vintage, trade paper, $12.00, 259 pages, ISBN 1-4000-3183-4), all the wraps are off. Knipfel is a super-saturated SF-head, just now bending his talents in the direction of the genre.

Roscoe Baragon is a faded, jaded reporter at a second-string New York paper named the *Sentinel*. His specialty is the "Kook Beat," human-interest stories about borderline crazies. It's a far cry from the ground-breaking journalism he once delivered, but Baragon is content in his decrepitude, taking solace from his only two friends, city coroner Emily Roschen and Z-grade film-maker Eel O'Neill. However, all this aimless malingering is to change. In the midst of one average week, a radioactive corpse turns up in the city. Alerted to the suppressed news by Emily, Baragon begins digging. What he turns up on the corpse—along with dozens of other data on vanishing SRO hotel residents, a plague of earthquakes, and a falling space station, among other matters—eventually will cohere into a giant conspiracy aimed at the destruction of humankind. The fact that this conspiracy appears to take its lineaments from the plot of *Godzilla vs. Megalon* does nothing to convince Emily, Eel, and Baragon's boss, Ed Montgomery, of his sanity. It's Baragon alone against the world.

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Having experienced madness and society's reactions to insanity firsthand, Knipfel exhibits a sure hand at his depiction of the various nutcases who come calling on Baragon. I'm reminded of the affectionate, empathetic portraits of such crazies that Philip K. Dick used to paint. In his memoirs, Knipfel has speculated deeply on consensus reality and trespasses against it that land people in institutions, and here he gives such theories solid fictional embodiment. Baragon himself is plainly modeled on Knipfel, right down to the trench coat attire both favor and their Midwestern origins and general misanthropy. But the fictional reporter is individuated in his own right, and Knipfel proves to us that his imagination is fully equal to his autobiographical abilities.

With echoes of Vonnegut and humorous-fantasy writer Christopher Moore, *The Buzzing* will make you forget that there was ever any show named *The X-Files*. Knipfel's version of the Grand Scheme that seeks to run our lives is so much more trashily acute and entertaining, and without all the glamorous angst of Scully and Mulder.

Nine Princes in Gray Matter

There is a small subset of SF that specializes in psychological aberrations, focusing on the aliens who dwell within our own minds. Theodore Sturgeon was the acknowledged master of this form: consider a story such as his "Bulkhead," which details the grueling spaceflight of a man and his unseen companion on the far side of the eponymous partition. More recently, Jonathan Lethem played in such an arena with his *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), with its Tourette's-suffering protagonist. I suppose the still-controversial Ballardian preference for "inner space" over "outer space" comes into play here somewhere, but I'd maintain that insofar as psychology and consciousness studies and allied disciplines are sciences, then such novels are quintessentially SF.

Now, from Matt Ruff, author of the wonderfully farcical, Neal-Stephensonesque *Sewer, Gas & Electric* (1997), comes a novel in this "alienist" vein that, while it is firmly planted in a contemporary milieu, yet partakes of the most fantastical effects. The book is titled *Set This House in Order: A Romance of Souls* (HarperCollins, hardcover, $25.95, 479 pages, ISBN 0-06-019562-2), and concerns two people with Multiple Personality Disorder, on the line of the three most famous such cases—Sybil, Eve White, and Billy Milligan—all of whom are referenced herein.

Andrew Gage is a highly functional MPD sufferer, thanks to the laborious efforts of his various interior "souls" to cooperate and co-exist. Andy's "father," an older soul named Aaron, has fashioned a kind of Memory Palace amidst the Gage body's gray matter, a virtual-reality-style, wetware House where all the souls can live and communicate and share the body's perceptions. Although Andy is technically only two years old, he's in charge of the day-to-day functioning of the body in society, backed up by dozens of his mental kinfolk—and menaced by one renegade, fettered soul named Gideon. Andy has a tenuous friendship with his employer, a flighty woman named Julie Sivik, who shares his secret.

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One day Julie meets another MPD victim, a young woman named Penny Driver. Out of a mixture of altruism, curiosity, and perversity, Julie takes Penny under her wing and insists that Andy help Penny set her own unbuilt House in order. Reluctantly, Andy agrees, little foreseeing that contact with Penny and her disobedient selves will soon bring his own House tumbling down, release the malevolent Gideon, and force Andy to confront buried parts of his past that even Aaron does not recognize.

Having established this elaborate, bizarre scenario, Ruff gives a bravura performance, right from the opening pages, where we watch Andy and his multiples sharing a single breakfast. For its first half, the novel is told in alternating sections, switching between Andy's POV and Penny's. After a shocking midpoint climax (and I defy you to guess the nature of the shocker in advance), the two narrative threads merge, reflecting the closer bond between Penny and Andy and the situation they find themselves in, on a roadtrip to hell and back. Just as this formalistic detail mirrors the content of the book, so do a dozen other objective correlatives mirror the psychological realities of the characters. The role of various houses in the book, obviously, is highly symbolic. But this is no stiff, formulaic allegory. Ruff creates living, breathing characters—the distinct souls within Andy bicker and feud like Roger Zelazny's Amber royalty—who operate both within a recognizable real world and within the vivid mental geography of Andy's brain. Ruff's prose and plotting is a fine blend of the quotidian and the Gothic, the painful and the humorous, making for a book that's very hard to put down.

In *To Live Again* (1969), Robert Silverberg postulated a future where technology would allow anyone to host multiple souls in a kind of cyber-MPD with dire consequences. Ruff's humanistic book suggests that our brains, backed by enough willpower, love, and ethical strength, are able to surmount such challenges, whether organically or artificially induced.

Small Press Titles

NBM (555 8th Avenue, Suite 1202, NY, NY 10018) continues to issue graphic novels of exceptional variety and attractiveness. Two new titles highlight the spectrum of the fantastic that NBM spans. In *Wake 4/5* (trade paper, $14.95, 96 pages, ISBN 1-56163-341-0) writer Jean David Morvan and artist Philippe Buchet continue on with the story (established across three previous volumes I've reviewed) of a young woman named Navee, a former savage castaway now resident aboard a gigantic star-traveling fleet and employed as an agent to aid the fleet in its contacts with various planetary cultures. The first adventure herein, "The Sign of the Demons," finds Navee betrayed by a fellow agent on a world in the midst of revolution. The second title—represented by a string of alien pictographs unreproducible here—is a rare instance of a completely shipbound adventure, during which an underclass of the Wake fleet chooses terrorism to make its point. Morvan's conceptual and thematic sophistication is astonishing, the equal of, say, Alistair Reynolds's, and his talents are

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felicitously matched by Buchet's intricate, dense and amazingly harmonious and astonishing drawings. This series is a winner, and at two tales for the price of one, a bargain as well.

Bill Plympton, best-known as an animator whose biomorphic weirdnesses have brightened movie screens under such rubrics as "How to Kiss," "25 Ways to Quit Smoking," and "Plymptoons," is planning to premiere a full-length feature cartoon soon, but the fully satisfying storyboards for this venture arrive first in book form as *Hair High* (trade paper, $10.95, 208 pages, ISBN 1-56163-354-2). This archetypical saga of greasers, jocks, hairhoppers, muscle cars, and one lone hapless nerd detours into outright fantasy mainly at its macabre, posthumous conclusion, but even before that such scenes as a science teacher literally hacking up his guts and the rampages of a lust-fueled sports mascot convey Plympton's trademark comic assault on reality. Buy this book, or be forever doomed to metaphorically be the slave named Spud, who carries the textbooks of Cherri, the cruel queen of Hair High.

Mythos Books (351 Lake Ridge Road, Poplar Bluff, MO 63901), as one might guess from its name, concerns itself with matters Lovecraftian, producing books, journals, and odd touchstones relating to dear Uncle Howard's literary legacy. For instance, the firm has taken over from Necronomicon Press the publication of *Crypt of Chthulu*, the long-running journal of HPL studies. Well-known scholar Robert Price is the editor, and a recent issue, Number 107 (chapbook, $4.50, 56 pages, ISSN unavailable) is a typically classy effort. Three old-fashioned but enthralling stories riffing on August Derleth's contributions to the Mythos (by John Glasby, Lin Carter, and Ala Gullette) are complemented by a poem and a small essay. For those who like a more interactive relationship with the eldritch denizens of the Chthulu-verse, consider *The H.P. Lovecraft Tarot* (boxed deck of cards plus manual of instructions, $40.00, ISBN 0-9659433-8-0). With entertaining text by Eric C. Friedman and arresting and shivery two-color art by Daryl Hutchinson, these cards will furnish your nightmares with concrete images of such well-known frights as Tsathoggua and Shub Niggurath, while allowing you possibly to foretell and avoid distressing events such as being eaten alive by ghouls. But the most important offering from Mythos this time around is a new collection of Thomas Ligotti's stories—actually, a short novel and two smaller pieces—titled *My Work Is Not Yet Done* (hardcover, $30.00, 200 pages, ISBN 0-9659433-7-2). Ligotti is my favorite horror writer currently working, and his "confessional" brand of terror, predicated on the darkest urges of misanthropy and nihilism (literary foundations that Ligotti himself forthrightly admits to) nonetheless manages to be blackly, cosmically humorous. The centerpiece of this volume is the long title story, which concerns the workplace harassment and revenge experienced by Frank Dominio, a combination of Bartleby the Scrivener and Freddy Krueger, who happens to have the misfortune to come into contact with the "Great Black Swine" at the heart of the universe. "I Have a Special Plan for This World" and "The Nightmare Network" are in-

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triguing pendants to this tale of "corporate horror," amplifying Ligotti's take on an all-too-human capitalism that seeks to market "the ultimate product—Nothing . . . [for which the sellers] would command the ultimate price—Everything."

An essential companion to Ligotti's fiction is *The Thomas Ligotti Reader* (trade paper, Wildside Press, $19.95, 188 pages, ISBN 1-59224-130-1), a gathering of essays and interviews ably assembled by editor Darrell Schweitzer. Ranging from close textual readings of Ligotti's fiction by Robert Price, Matt Cardin, and others; to examinations of the kind of music most allied with Ligotti (post-industrial); to some theorizing by Ligotti himself on the nature of horror fiction; to a complete bibliography by Douglas Anderson, this book offers splendid insights into the unique corpus of Ligotti's work. Read the Mythos offering with the Wildside volume close to hand. You may reach Wildside at POB 301, Holicong, PA 18928.

Nemonymous, the handsome and innovative magazine helmed by D.F. Lewis <*www.nemonymous.com*>, has now reached issue number 3 (perfect-bound, $10.00, 96 pages, ISSN 1474-2020). Herein we find twenty-one new stories, presented anonymously, and a key to the heretofore-unrevealed authors of the tales in issue 2, as per the self-abasing and art-heightening program of the zine. The level of writing in this new volume is very high, with all the stories repaying your attention, but space allows me to cite only three favorites. "Gerald and the Soul Doctor" recounts what happens when an average citizen decides to step ever so slightly out of conformity to society's rituals. "Digging for Adults" takes place in a neighborhood where "the adults had disappeared. . . . [S]ick of taking care of the children, they made a communal decision to bury themselves underground in hopes that, after a while, the children would get the hint that nobody liked them and go away." And "Insanity over Creamer's Fields" postulates the apparition of a gigantic floating fetus and the havoc it brings. Editor Lewis and his cloaked crew deserve your support, for they are excavating the purest veins of writing, where only text, not the hype, matters.

Anyone who enjoys Joe Lansdale's more retro horror efforts will certainly welcome Peter Crowther's *Darkness, Darkness* (Cemetery Dance Publications, hardcover, $35.00, 165 pages, ISBN 1-58767-049-6). Book One of the "Forever Twilight" cycle, this novel very intelligently and deftly invokes a host of cinematic spookshows, from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) onward. Four people—the brothers Rick and Geoff, Geoff's DJ wife Melanie and a second jockey named Johnny—are working the night shift at radio station KMRT when a blinding flash removes all their fellow citizens from their small-town neighborhood. Before they can discern any reason for the abduction, a second flash the next night returns the townspeople, but in drastically altered form. Now the four remaining humans face a horde of undead enemies in the guise of their friends and relatives. The subsequent siege of KMRT lives up to all our expectations, providing cinematic gore and suspense. Crowther, a UK resident, has a flair for rendering America, and his cast of players promotes in-

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stant empathy. Mysteries aplenty remain to be explored in future volumes, and Crowther seems primed to proceed at breakneck speed. Contact Cemetery Dance Publications at POB 943, Abingdon, MD 21009.

Not only is Crowther an accomplished fictioneer, but he is also the guiding light behind PS Publishing (1 Hamilton House, 4 Park Avenue, Harrogate HG2 9BQ, U.K.), which continues to pour forth strong books at a steady pace. Three recent titles illustrate the range of the firm's offerings, all of which are available in limited signed hardcover editions as well as the less expensive ones cited here. Stephen Gallagher's *White Bizango* (trade paper, $14.00, 159 pages, ISBN 1-902880-50-1) is a novel whose exact supernatural content is debatable till the end. Yet so humorous, suspenseful, and captivating is this tale that you would be depriving yourself of a major treat if you exclude it for its borderline-fantasy nature. Detective John Lafcadio has an amiable enough life in the small city of Iberville, Louisiana—until he is assaulted by a creepy white-guy voodoo practitioner and nearly killed. This near-death experience draws him into a world of cults and rip-off artists policed by the "voodoo cop" squad. Lafcadio's life will never be the same. Gallagher writes like a combination of John D. MacDonald and Robert Parker and his story will draw you along in its supersonic slipstream. Encountering such lines as these, when Lafcadio is about to depart from a one-night stand, "She murmured into her pillow, something I couldn't hear.... It could have been anything from *You were the best* to *Take any small prize from the lower shelf...*," we know we are in expert noir hands. Four students and a master mage named Septern occupy a castle under siege, where the secret of a world-shattering spell lies immured. Everyone is after Septern to release the spell he has created, named Dawnthief, and they are unfussy about his survival after they get what they need. Such is the scenario of James Barclay's *Light Stealer* (trade paper, $14.00, 89 pages, ISBN 1-902-880-61-7), which marshals a rigorously scientific form of magic and some Vancian stylings to good effect. Finally, a book whose Grand Guignol stylings and effects are not exactly my cup of tea, yet whose integrity and manic zeal are undeniable. Cliff Burns's *Righteous Blood* (trade paper, $14.00, 177 pages, ISBN 1-902880-46-3) consists of two novellas. The first, "Living With the Foleys," riffs on Jack Vance's *Bad Ronald* (1973), envisioning a bum who lives in a middle-class home unbeknownst to its owners, and who begins to direct the family's life in devious ways. Burns's depiction of Phil, the intruder, blends creepiness with empathy. In "Kept," however, any gentle side to Burns's narrative is out the window. Maxine is the Caretaker at the Strathcona, an apartment building full of freaks. Herself a serial killer, Maxine finds her latest captive victim a bit more than she bargained for, and when he escapes, ghastly slaughters ensue. Throughout, Burns delivers a blood-drenched, leering performance that is redeemed, if at all, only by the utter damnation of its entire cast.

Eric Shanower is well-known as an artist of manifold skills. His ongoing graphic-novel series recount-

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ing the Trojan War (*Age of Bronze*), for example, glows with meticulous, heroic realism. Perhaps not so well-known are Shanower's writerly gifts. But these latter qualities, as well as his illustrative prowess, are fully on display in *The Salt Sorcerer of Oz and Other Stories* (Hungry Tiger Press, hardcover, $24.95, 288 pages, ISBN 1-929527-06-3). In six stories and seventy-six illustrations that wittily and vigorously and respectfully supplement the Oz canon, Shanower displays just the right mix of reverence and revisionism. He introduces exciting new characters such as the wizard of the title—composed all of salt and festooned with shakers bearing magic crystals—and a tyrannical Mushroom Queen. In the Mushroom Queen's tale starring Dorothy (who as Shanower draws her, looks more modern but still innocent and charming), he fashions something akin to an H. Rider Haggard lost-race adventure, without betraying any of the whimsy of Ozma's realm. The legacy of L. Frank Baum and John R. Neill rests safely in Shanower's loving and deft hands. Write to Hungry Tiger at 5995 Dandridge Lane, Suite 121, San Diego, CA 92115. ○

Chat online
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Fall Fiction **November 25 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Chat with Roger MacBride Allen (*The Shores of Tomorrow*), Dave Duncan (*Impossible Odds*), Philip Baruth (*The X President*), and Mark Budz (*Clade*) about their new novels.

Tolkien Chat **December 9 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Douglas A. Anderson, author of *Tales Before Tolkien: The Roots of Modern Fantasy* and *The Annotated Hobbit;* and Daniel Grotta, author of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth* chat about fantasy and **The Lord of the Rings**.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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Traviss, Karen—
Suitable for the Orient (ss) ..... Feb 76

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Vick, Edd—
First Principles (ss) ..... Sep 89

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Margaux (na) ..... May 100
Williamson, Jack—
The Man From Somewhere (nt) ... Oct/Nov 60
Willis, Connie—
Just Like the Ones We Used to Know (na) ..... Dec 14
Willrich, Chris—
Count to One (nt) ..... May 14
Wolfe, Gene—
Graylord Man's Last Words (ss) ... May 40

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EIGHTEENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) eighteenth year.

Please vote. Your ballot will be automatically entered in our drawing for a free one-year subscription. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you,* the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover artist, you liked best in the year 2003. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.137-139) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the art award, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual *poem,* rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some cautions: Only material from 2003-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index.** No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 2, 2004,** and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction,* Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Flr., New York, NY. 10016.** You can also vote via the Internet at **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**, but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at **www.asimovs.com.**

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so *every* vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference. So don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

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BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3 _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
2 _____
3 _____

BEST COVER ARTIST:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

_____

SIGNATURE: _____

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Here's word on the 2005 North American SF Con (NASFiC), and the 2006 WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

NOVEMBER 2003

21–23—**CapClave.** For info, write: **c/o Cathy Green, 3003 Van Ness NW #W527, Washington DC 20008.** Or phone: **(301) 468-7744** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.capclave.org. (E-mail) info@capclave.org.** Con will be held in: Silver Spring MD (Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: William Tenn.

21–23—**FantasyCon. www.britishfantasysociety.org.uk.** Tillington Hall, Stafford UK. Christopher Fowler, C. Fisher.

21–23—**Anime USA. (703) 764-2597. www.animeusa.org.** Sheraton, Tysons Corner VA (DC area). H. Matsubara, Aro.

21–23—**MidWest FurFest. www.furfest.org.** Hyatt Regency, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. Anthropomorphics/furries.

21–23—**HanseTrek. www.hansetrek.de.** Sachsenwald Hotel, Norden, Germany. J. Combs, O'Reilly, Herzler. Star Trek.

22–23—**Creation. (818) 409-0960. www.creationent.com.** Hilton, Burbank (Los Angeles) CA. Commercial media event.

28–30—**LosCon. (818) 760-9234. www.loscon.org.** Hilton, Burbank CA. Saberhagen, Harvia, Chalker. Old-time LA con.

28–30—**Chicago Tardis. (630) 790-0905.** Sheraton, Arlington Hts., IL. Y. Tso, F. Hines, A. Wills, M. Sheard. Dr. Who.

29–30—**Creation. Contact as above.** Marriott, Brooklyn. NY. Their traditional NYC Thanksgiving commercial event.

29–30—**MidOhioCon. (419) 526-1427. www.midohiocon.com.** Hilton Easton, Columbus OH. Koenig, J. Lockhart. Media.

DECEMBER 2003

5–7—**SMOFCon, 707 Sapling Ln., Deerfield IL 60015. www.midfan.org.** Chicago IL. Con organizers talk shop.

6–13—**Dr. Who Cruise, Box 936135, Margate FL 33093. (800) 683-7447, x77626.** West. Caribbean cruise. Courtney.

7–14—**SeaTrek, 13931 SW 108th, Miami FL 33186. (305) 387-1701.** Eastern Caribbean cruise. Takei, Wang, Biggs.

12–14—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. www.philcon.org.** Marriott. Jack McDevitt, H. Harrison, P. David.

12–14—**Numa Rei-No Con, 3601 Huntlee Dr., New Orleans LA 70131. (504) 391-0471.** Kenner LA. DeJesus. Anime.

14—**JediCon, Box 38727, London E10 7YH, UK. (020) 8523-1074.** Sports Complex, Basildon UK. M. Sheard. Star Wars.

15–17—**Fellowship Gathering, 20 Eglinton Av. E., #200, Toronto ON M4P 1A9. (416) 876-8743.** Sheraton. Tolkien.

JANUARY 2004

2–4—**EveCon, 1607 Thomas Rd., Friendly MD 20744. (301) 292-5231. www.fantek.org.** Sheraton, Reston VA. Tynie.

2–4—**ShadowCon, 5310 Hungerford Rd., Memphis TN 38118. www.shadowcon.org.** Days Hotel, Memphis TN. Relaxed.

9–11—**GAFilk, 890F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075. www.gafilk.org.** Holiday, Airport N., Atlanta GA. SF folksinging.

9–11—**Creation, 1010 N. Central Ave., 4th floor, Glendale CA 91202. Contact as above.** Metropole, London UK.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $160+.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $135/£85.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's abroad.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91489. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125

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NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY COVER STORY

R. Garcia y Robertson, perhaps the best writer of fast-paced, flat-out, unabashed, interstellar adventure stories since the heydays of Poul Anderson and Jack Vance, returns next issue with our lead story for February, a gorgeously colored and exciting edge-of-your-seater that sweeps us along with an interstellar castaway determined to fight her way back to where she belongs, even in the face of the most overwhelming obstacles and against the most daunting of odds, launching herself on a "Long Voyage Home" where her life hangs in the balance every second of the way . . .

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Veteran writer **Tom Purdom** invites us along on a suspenseful interplanetary journey and gives us a fascinating glimpse of passion, intrigue, and obsession among the postmodern set, in "Romance for Augmented Trio"; multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Mike Resnick** returns to warn us about some of the strange things that happened during "Travels with My Cats"; new writer **Jack Skillingstead** turns back time, with some odd and disquieting results, in "Rewind"; popular writer **William Sanders** stuffs us into a bush plane and flies us up to the remote backcountry of Alaska to investigate some of the bizarre and very funny goings-on "At Ten Wolf Lake"; and new writer **Matthew Jarpe** heads out to Pluto to dicker with some very *alien* aliens, in "Language Barrier."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column pauses to examine some "Fragments Out of Time"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column considers the question of "Genre" in the online world; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our February issue on sale at your newsstand on December 30, 2003.

COMING SOON

fantastic new stories by **Robert Reed**, **Gene Wolfe**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Ian McDowell**, **Sarah A. Hoyt**, **Larry Niven**, **Chris Beckett**, **William Barton**, **Kage Baker**, **James Patrick Kelly**, **Phillip C. Jennings**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Mary Rosenblum**, and many more.

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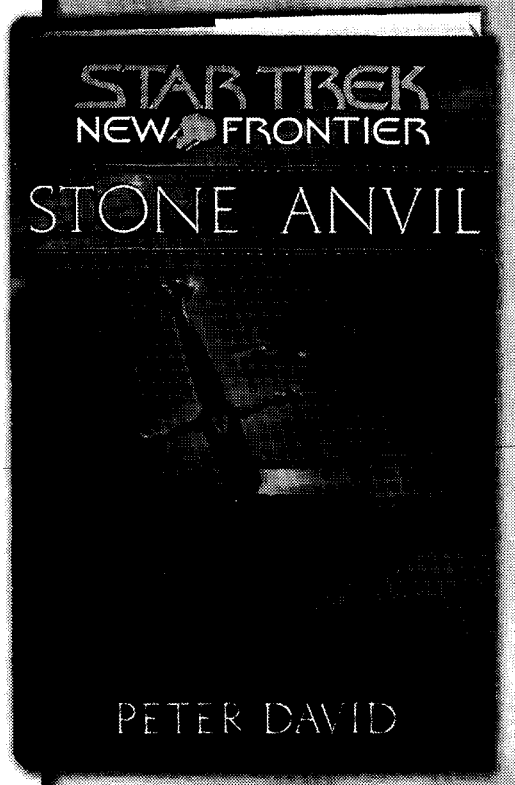

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